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MADONNA MARY.

CHAPTER I.

Major Ochterlony had been very fidgety after the coming in of the mail. He was very often so, as all his friends were aware, and nobody so much as Mary, his wife, who was herself, on ordinary occasions, of an admirable composure. But the arrival of the mail, which is so welcome an event at an Indian station, and which generally affected the Major very mildly, had produced a singular impression upon him on this special occasion. He was not a man who possessed a large correspondence in his own person; he had reached middle life, and had nobody particular belonging to him, except his wife and his little children, who were as yet too young to have been sent "home;" and consequently there was nobody to receive letters from, except a few married brothers and sisters, who don't count, as everybody knows. That kind of formally affectionate correspondence is not generally exciting, and even Major Ochterlony supported it with composure. But as for the mail which arrived on the 15th of April, 1838, its effect was different. He went out and in so often, that Mary got very little good of her letters, which were from her young sister and her old aunt, and were naturally overflowing with all kinds

of pleasant gossip and domestic information. The present writer has so imperfect an idea of what an Indian bungalow is like, that it would be impossible for her to convey a clear idea to the reader, who probably knows much better about it. But yet it was in an Indian bungalow that Mrs. Ochterlony was seated — in the dim hot atmosphere, out of which the sun was carefully excluded, but in which, nevertheless, the inmates simmered softly with the patience of people who cannot help it, and who are used to their martyrdom. She sat still, and did her best to make out the pleasant babble in the letters, which seemed to take sound to itself as she read, and to break into a sweet confusion of kind voices, and rustling leaves, and running water, such as, she knew, had filled the little rustic drawing-room in which the letters were written. The sister was very young, and the aunt was old, and all the experience of the world possessed by the two together, might have gone into Mary's thimble, which she kept playing with upon her finger as she read. But though she knew twenty times better than they did, the soft old lady's gentle counsel, and the audacious girl's advice and censure, were sweet to Mary, who smiled many a time at their simplicity, and yet took the good of it in a way that was peculiar to her. She read, and she smiled in her reading, and felt the fresh English air blow about her, and the leaves rustling — if it had not been for the Major, who went and came like a ghost, and let everything fall that he touched, and hunted every innocent beetle or lizard that had come in to see how things were going on; for he was one of those men who have a great, almost womanish objection to reptiles and insects, which is a sentiment much mis-

placed in India. He fidgeted so much, indeed, as to disturb even his wife's accustomed nerves at last.

"Is there anything wrong — has anything happened?" she asked, folding up her letter, and laying it down in her open work-basket. Her anxiety was not profound, for she was accustomed to the Major's "ways," but still she saw it was necessary for his comfort to utter what was on his mind.

"When you have read your letters I want to speak to you," he said. "What do your people mean by sending you such heaps of letters? I thought you would never be done. Well, Mary, this is what it is — there's nothing wrong with the children, or anybody belonging to us, thank God; but it's very nearly as bad, and I am at my wit's end. Old Sommerville's dead."

"Old Sommerville!" said Mrs. Ochterlony. This time she was utterly perplexed and at a loss. She could read easily enough the anxiety which filled her husband's handsome, restless face; but, then, so small a matter put *him* out of his ordinary! And she could not for her life remember who old Sommerville was.

"I daresay *you* don't recollect him," said the Major, in an aggrieved tone. "It is very odd how everything has gone wrong with us since that false start. It is an awful shame, when a set of old fogies put young people in such a position — all for nothing, too," Major Ochterlony added: "for after we were actually married, everybody came round. It is an awful shame!"

"If I was a suspicious woman," said Mary, with a smile, "I should think it was our marriage that you called a false start and an awful shame."

"And so it is, my love: so it is," said the innocent soldier, his face growing more and more cloudy. As

for his wife being a suspicious woman, or the possible existence of any delicacy on her part about his words, the Major knew better than that. The truth was that he might have given utterance to sentiments of the most atrocious description on that point, sentiments which would have broken the heart and blighted the existence, so to speak, of any sensitive young woman, without producing the slightest effect upon Mary, or upon himself, to whom Mary was so utterly and absolutely necessary, that the idea of existing without her never once entered into his restless but honest brain. "That is just what it is," he said; "it is a horrid business for me, and I don't know what to do about it. They must have been out of their senses to drive us to marry as we did; and we were a couple of awful fools," said the Major, with the gravest and most care-worn countenance. Mrs. Ochterlony was still a young woman, handsome and admired, and she might very well have taken offence at such words; but, oddly enough, there was something in his gravely-disturbed face and pathetic tone which touched another chord in Mary's breast. She laughed, which was unkind, considering all the circumstances, and took up her work, and fixed a pair of smiling eyes upon her perplexed husband's face.

"I daresay it is not so bad as you think," she said, with the manner of a woman who was used to this kind of thing. "Come, and tell me all about it." She drew her chair a trifle nearer his, and looked at him with a face in which a touch of suppressed amusement was visible, under a good deal of gravity and sympathy. She was used to lend a sympathetic ear to all his difficulties, and to give all her efforts to their elucidation, but still she could not help feeling it somewhat

droll to be complained to in this strain about her own marriage. "We *were* a couple of fools," she said, with a little laugh, "but it has not turned out so badly as it might have done." Upon which rash statement the Major shook his head.

"It is easy for you to say so," he said, "and if I were to go no deeper, and look no further — It is all on your account, Mary. If it were not on your account —"

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Ochterlony, still struggling with a perverse inclination to laugh; "but now tell me what old Sommerville has to do with it; and who old Sommerville is; and what put it into his head just at this moment to die."

The Major sighed, and gave her a half-irritated, half-melancholy look. To think she should laugh, when, as he said to himself, the gulf was yawning under her very feet. "My dear Mary," he said, "I wish you would learn that this is not anything to laugh at. Old Sommerville was the old gardener at Earlston, who went with us, you recollect, when we went to — to Scotland. My brother would never have him back again, and he went among his own friends. He was a stupid old fellow. I don't know what he was good for, for my part; — but," said Major Ochterlony, with solemnity, "he was the only surviving witness of our unfortunate marriage — that is the only thing that made him interesting to me."

"Poor old man!" said Mary, "I am very sorry. I had forgotten his name; but really, — if you speak like this of our unfortunate marriage, you will hurt my feel ings," Mrs. Ochterlony added. She had cast down her eyes on her work, but still there was a gleam of fun

out of one of the corners. This was all the effect made upon her mind by words which would have naturally produced a scene between half the married people in the world.

As for the Major, he sighed: he was in a sighing mood, and at such moments his wife's obtusity and thoughlessness always made him sad. "It is easy talking," he said, "and if it were not on your account, Mary — The fact is that everything has gone wrong that had any connexion with it. The blacksmith's house, you know, was burned down, and his kind of a register — if it was any good, and I am sure I don't know if it was any good; and then that woman died, though she was as young as you are, and as healthy, and nobody had any right to expect that she would die," Major Ochterlony added with an injured tone, "and now old Sommerville; and we have nothing in the world to vouch for its being a good marriage, except what that blacksmith fellow called the 'lines.' Of course you have taken care of the lines," said the Major, with a little start. It was the first time that this new subject of doubt had occurred to his mind.

"To vouch for its being a good marriage!" said Mrs. Ochterlony: "really, Hugh, you go too far. Our marriage is not a thing to make jokes about, you know — nor to get up alarms about either. Everybody knows all about it, both among your people and mine. It is very vexatious and disagreeable of you to talk so." As she spoke the colour rose to Mary's matron cheek. She had learned to make great allowances for her husband's anxious temper and perpetual panics; but this suggestion was too much for her patience just at the moment. She calmed down, however, almost immediately,

and came to herself with a smile. "To think you should almost have made me angry!" she said, taking up her work again. This did not mean to imply that to make Mrs. Ochterlony angry was at all an impossible process. She had her gleams of wrath like other people, and sometimes it was not at all difficult to call them forth; but, so far as the Major's "temperament" was concerned, she had got, by much exercise, to be the most indulgent of women — perhaps by finding that no other way of meeting it was of any use.

"It is not my fault, my love," said the Major, with a meekness which was not habitual to him. "But I hope you are quite sure you have the lines. Any mistake about them would be fatal. They are the only proof that remains to us. I wish you would go and find them, Mary, and let me make sure."

"The lines!" said Mrs. Ochterlony, and, notwithstanding her self-command, she faltered a little. "Of course I must have them somewhere — I don't quite recollect at this moment. What do you want them for, Hugh? Are we coming into a fortune, or what are the statistics good for? When I can lay my hand upon them, I will give them to you," she added, with that culpable carelessness which her husband had already so often remarked in her. If it had been a trumpery picture or book that had been mislaid, she could not have been less concerned.

"When you can lay your hands upon them!" cried the exasperated man. "Are you out of your senses, Mary? Don't you know that they are your sheet-anchor, your charter — the only document you have —"

"Hugh," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "tell me what this means. There must be something in it more than I

can see. What need have I for documents? What does it matter to us this old man being dead, more than it matters to any one the death of somebody who has been at their wedding? It is sad, but I don't see how it can be a personal misfortune. If you really mean anything, tell me what it is."

The Major for his part grew angry, as was not unnatural. "If you choose to give me the attention you ought to give to your husband when he speaks seriously to you, you will soon perceive what I mean," he said; and then he repented, and came up to her and kissed her. "My poor Mary, my bonnie Mary," he said. "If that wretched irregular marriage of ours should bring harm to you! It is you only I am thinking of, my darling — that you should have something to rest upon;" and his feelings were so genuine that with that the water stood in his eyes.

As for Mrs. Ochterlony, she was very near losing patience altogether; but she made an effort and restrained herself. It was not the first time that she had heard compunctions expressed for the irregular marriage, which certainly was not her fault. But this time she was undeniably a little alarmed, for the Major's gravity was extreme. "Our marriage is no more irregular than it always was," she said. "I wish you would give up this subject, Hugh; I have you to rest upon, and everything that a woman can have. We never did anything in a corner," she continued, with a little vehemence. "Our marriage was just as well known, and well published, as if it had been in St. George's, Hanover Square. I cannot imagine what you are aiming at. And besides, it is done, and we cannot mend it," she added, abruptly. On the whole, the

runaway match had been a pleasant frolic enough; there was no earthly reason, except some people's stupid notions, why they should not have been married; and everybody came to their senses rapidly, and very little harm had come of it. But the least idea of doubt on such a subject is an offence to a woman, and her colour rose and her breath came quick, without any will of hers. As for the Major, he abandoned the broader general question, and went back to the detail, as was natural to the man.

"If you only have the lines all safe," he said, "if you would but make sure of that. I confess old Sommerville's death was a great shock to me, Mary,— the last surviving witness; but Kirkman tells me the marriage lines in Scotland are a woman's safeguard, and Kirkman is a Scotchman and ought to know."

"Have you been consulting *him?*" said Mary, with a certain despair; "have you been talking of such a subject to —"

"I don't know where I could have a better confidant," said the Major. "Mary, my darling, they are both attached to you; and they are good people, though they talk; and then he is Scotch, and understands. If anything were to happen to me, and you had any difficulty in proving —"

"Hugh, for Heaven's sake have done with this. I cannot bear any more," cried Mrs. Ochterlony, who was at the end of her powers.

It was time for the great *coup* for which his restless soul had been preparing. He approached the moment of fate with a certain skill, such as weak people occasionally display, and mad people almost always, — as if the feeble intellect had a certain right by reason

of its weakness to the same kind of defence which is possessed by the mind diseased. "Hush, Mary, you are excited," he said, "and it is only you I am thinking of. If anything should happen to me — I am quite well, but no man can answer for his own life: — my dear, I am afraid you will be vexed with what I am going to say. But for my own satisfaction, for my peace of mind — if we were to go through the ceremony again —"

Mary Ochterlony rose up with sudden passion. It was altogether out of proportion to her husband's intentions or errors, and perhaps to the occasion. *That* was but a vexatious complication of ordinary life; and he a fidgety, uneasy, perhaps over-conscientious, well-meaning man. She rose, tragic without knowing it, with a swell in her heart of the unutterable and supreme — feeling herself for the moment an outraged wife, an insulted woman, and a mother wounded to the heart. "I will hear no more," she said, with lips that had suddenly grown parched and dry. "Don't say another word. If it has come to this, I will take my chance with my boys. Hugh, no more, no more." As she lifted her hands with an impatient gesture of horror, and towered over him as he sat by, having thus interrupted and cut short his speech, a certain fear went through Major Ochterlony's mind. Could her mind be going? Had the shock been too much for her? He could not understand otherwise how the suggestion which he thought a wise one, and of advantage to his own peace of mind, should have stung her into such an incomprehensible passion. But he was afraid and silenced, and could not go on.

"My dear Mary," he said mildly, "I had no inten-

tion of vexing you. We can speak of this another time. Sit down, and I'll get you a glass of water," he added, with anxious affection; and hurried off to seek it: for he was a good husband, and very fond of his wife, and was terrified to see her turn suddenly pale and faint, notwithstanding that he was quite capable of wounding her in the most exquisite and delicate point. But then he did not mean it. He was a matter-of-fact man, and the idea of marrying his wife over again in case there might be any doubtfulness about the first marriage, seemed to him only a rational suggestion, which no sensible woman ought to be disturbed by; though no doubt it was annoying to be compelled to have recourse to such an expedient. So he went and fetched her the water, and gave up the subject, and stayed with her all the afternoon and read the papers to her, and made himself agreeable. It was a puzzling sort of demonstration on Mary's part, but that did not make her the less Mary, and the dearest and best of earthly creatures. So Major Ochterlony put his proposal aside for a more favourable moment, and did all he could to make his wife forget it, and behaved himself as a man naturally would behave who was recognised as the best husband and most domestic man in the regiment. Mary took her seat again and her work, and the afternoon went on as if nothing had happened. They were a most united couple, and very happy together, as everybody knew; or if one of them at any chance moment was perhaps less than perfectly blessed, it was not, at any rate, because the love-match, irregular as it might be, had ended in any lack of love.

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Ochterlony sat and worked and listened, and her husband read the papers to her, picking out by instinct all those little bits of news that are grateful to people who are far away from their own country. And he went through the births and marriages, to see "if there is anybody we know," — notwithstanding that he was aware that corner of the paper is one which a woman does not leave to any reader, but makes it a principle to examine herself. And Mary sat still and went on with her work, and not another syllable was said about old Sommerville, or the marriage lines, or anything that had to do with the previous conversation. This tranquillity was all in perfect good faith on Major Ochterlony's side, who had given up the subject with the intention of waiting until a more convenient season, and who had relieved his mind by talking of it, and could put off his anxiety. But as for Mary, it was not in good faith that she put on this expression of outward calm. She knew her husband, and she knew that he was pertinacious and insisting, and that a question which he had once started was not to be made an end of, and finally settled, in so short a time. She sat with her head a little bent, hearing the bits of news run on like a kind of accompaniment to the quick-flowing current of her own thoughts. Her heart was beating quick, and her blood coursing through her veins as if it had been a sudden access of fever which had come upon her. She was a tall, fair, serene

woman, with no paltry passion about her; but at the same time, when the occasion required it, Mary was capable of a vast suppressed fire of feeling which it gave her infinite trouble to keep down. This was a side of her character which was not suspected by the world in general — meaning of course the regiment, and the ladies at the station, who were all, more or less, military. Mrs. Ochterlony was the kind of woman to whom by instinct any stranger would have appropriated the name of Mary; and naturally all her intimates (and the regiment was very "nice," and lived in great harmony, and they were all intimate) called her by her Christian — most Christian name. And there were people who put the word Madonna before it, — "as if the two did not mean the same thing!" said little Mrs. Askell, the ensign's baby-wife, whose education had been neglected, but whom Mrs. Ochterlony had been very kind to. It was difficult to know how the title had originated, though people did say it was young Stafford, who had been brought up in Italy, and who had such a strange adoration for Mrs. Ochterlony, and who died, poor fellow — which perhaps was the best thing he could have done under the circumstances. "It was a special providence," Mrs. Kirkman said, who was the Colonel's wife: for, to be sure, to be romantically adored by a foolish young subaltern, was embarrassing for a woman, however perfect her mind and temper and fairest fame might be. It was he who originated the name, perhaps with some faint foolish thought of Petrarch and his Madonna Laura: and then he died and did no more harm; and a great many people adopted it, and Mary herself did not object to be addressed by that sweetest of titles.

And yet she was not meek enough for the name. Her complexion was very fair, but she had only a very faint rose-tint on her cheeks, so faint that people called her pale — which, with her fairness, was a drawback to her. Her hair was light-brown, with a golden reflection that went and came, as if it somehow depended upon the state of her mind and spirits; and her eyes were dark, large, and lambent, — not sparkling, but concentrating within themselves a soft, full depth of light. It was a question whether they were grey or brown; but at all events they were dark and deep. And she was, perhaps, a little too large and full and matronly in her proportions to please a youthful critic. Naturally such a woman had a mass of hair which she scarcely knew what to do with, and which at this moment seemed to betray the disturbed state of her mind by unusual gleams of the golden reflection which sometimes lay quite tranquil and hidden among the great silky coils. She was very happily married, and Major Ochterlony was the model husband of the regiment. They had married very young, and made a runaway love-match which was one of the few which everybody allowed had succeeded to perfection. But yet — — There are so few things in this world which succeed quite to perfection. It was Mrs. Kirkman's opinion that nobody else in the regiment could have supported the Major's fidgety temper. "It would be a great trial for the most experienced Christian," she said; "and dear Mary is still among the babes who have to be fed with milk; but Providence is kind, and I don't think she feels it as you or I would." This was the opinion of the Colonel's wife; but as for Mary, as she sat and worked and listened to her husband

reading the papers, perhaps she could have given a different version of her own composure and calm.

They had been married about ten years, and it was the first time he had taken *this* idea into his head. It is true that Mrs. Ochterlony looked at it solely as one of his ideas, and gave no weight whatever to the death of old Sommerville, or the loss of the marriage lines. She had been very young at the time of her marriage, and she was motherless, and had not those pangs of wounded delicacy to encounter, which a young woman ought to have who abandons her home in such a way. This perhaps arose from a defect in Mary's girlish undeveloped character; but the truth was, that she too belonged to an Indian family, and had no home to speak of, nor any of the sweeter ties to break. And after that, she had thought nothing more about it. She was married, and there was an end of it; and the young people had gone to India immediately, and had been very poor, and very happy, and very miserable, like other young people who begin the world in an inconsiderate way. But in spite of a hundred drawbacks, the happiness had always been pertinacious, lasted longest, and held out most steadfastly, and lived everything down. For one thing, Mrs. Ochterlony had a great deal to do, not being rich, and that happily quite preserved her from the danger of brooding over the Major's fidgets, and making something serious out of them. And then they had married so young that neither of them could ever identify himself or herself, or make the distinction that more reasonable couples can between "me" and "you." This time, however, the Major's restlessness had taken an uncomfortable form. Mary felt herself offended and insulted without

knowing why. She, a matron of ten years' standing, the mother of children! She could not believe that she had really heard true, that a repetition of her marriage could have been suggested to her — and at the same time she knew that it was perfectly true. It never occurred to her as a thing that possibly might have to be done, but still the suggestion itself was a wound. Major Ochterlony, for his part, thought of it as a precaution, and good for his peace of mind, as he had said; but to Mary it was scarcely less offensive than if somebody else had ventured to make love to her, or offer her his allegiance. It seemed to her an insult of the same description, an outrage which surely could not have occurred without some unwitting folly on her part to make such a proposal possible. She went away, searching back into the far, far distant years, as she sat at work and he read the papers. Had she anyhow failed in womanly restraint or delicacy at that moment when she was eighteen, and knew of nothing but honour, and love, and purity in the world? To be sure, she had not occupied herself very much about the matter — she had taken no pains for her own safety, and had not an idea what registrars meant, nor marriage laws, nor "lines." All that she knew was that a great many people were married at Gretna Green, and that she was married, and that there was an end of it. All these things came up and passed before her mind in a somewhat hurrying crowd; but Mary's mature judgment did not disapprove of the young bride who believed what was said to her, and was content, and had unbounded faith in the blacksmith and in her bridegroom. If that young woman had been occupying herself about the register, Mrs.

Ochterlony probably, looking back, would have entertained but a mean opinion of her. It was not anything *she* had done. It was not anything special, so far as she could see, in the circumstances: for hosts of people before and after had been married on the Scottish border. The only conclusion, accordingly, that she could come to, was the natural conclusion, that it was one of the Major's notions. But there was little comfort in that, for Mrs. Ochterlony was aware that his notions were persistent, that they lived and lasted and took new developments, and were sometimes very hard to get rid of. And she sighed in the midst of the newspaper reading, and betrayed that she had not been listening. Not that she expected her husband's new whim to come to anything; but because she foresaw in it endless repetitions of the scene which had just ended, and endless exasperation and weariness to herself.

Major Ochterlony stopped short when he heard his wife sigh — for he was not a man to leave anything alone, or to practise a discreet neglect — and laid down his paper and looked with anxiety in her face. "You have a headache," he said, tenderly; "I saw it the moment I entered the room. Go and lie down, my dear, and take care of yourself. You take care of everybody else," said the Major. "Why did you let me go on reading the paper like an ass, when your head aches?"

"My head does not ache. I was only thinking," said Mrs. Ochterlony: for she thought on the whole it would be best to resume the subject and endeavour to make an end of it. But this was not the Major's way. He had in the meantime emptied his reservoir, and it

had to be filled again before he would find himself in the vein for speech.

"But I don't want you to think," said Major Ochterlony with tender patronage: "that ought to be my part of the business. Have you got a novel? — if not, I'll go over and ask Miss Sorbette for one of hers. Lie down and rest, Mary; I can see that is all you are good for to-day."

Whether such a speech was aggravating or not to a woman who knew that it was her brain which had all the real weight of the family affairs to bear, may be conjectured by wives in general who know the sort of thing. But as for Mary, she was so used to it, that she took very little notice. She said, "Thank you, Hugh; I have got my letters here, which I have not read, and Aunt Agatha is as good as a novel." If this was not a very clear indication to the Major that his best policy was to take himself off for a little, and leave her in peace, it would be hard to say what could have taught him. But then Major Ochterlony was a man of a lively mind, and above being taught.

"Ah, Aunt Agatha," he said. "My dear, I know it is a painful subject, but we must, you know, begin to think where we are to send Hugh."

Mary shuddered; her nerves — for she had nerves, though she was so fair and serene — began to get excited. She said, "For pity's sake, not any more to-day. I am worn out. I cannot bear it. He is only six, and he is quite well."

The Major shook his head. "He is very well, but I have seen when a few hours changed all that," he said. "We cannot keep him much longer. At his

age, you know; all the little Hesketh go at four — I think ——"

"Ah," said Mary, "the Hesketh have nothing to do with it; they have floods and floods of children, — they don't know what it is; they can do without their little things; but I — Hugh, I am tired — I am not able for any more. Let me off for to-day."

Major Ochterlony regarded his wife with calm indulgence, and smoothed her hair off her hot forehead as he stooped to kiss her. "If you only would call things by the same names as other people, and say you have a headache, my dear," he said, in his caressing way. And then he was so good as to leave her, saying to himself as he went away that his Mary too had a little temper, though nobody gave her credit for it. Instead of annoying him, this little temper on Mary's part rather pleased her husband. When it came on he could be indulgent to her and pet her, which he liked to do; and then he could feel the advantage on his own side, which was not always the case. His heart quite swelled over her as he went away; so good, and so wise, and so fair, and yet not without that womanly weakness which it was sweet for a man to protect and pardon and put up with. Perhaps all men are not of the same way of thinking; but then Major Ochterlony reasoned only in his own way.

Mary stayed behind, and found it very difficult to occupy herself with anything. It was not temper, according to the ordinary meaning of the word. She was vexed, disturbed, disquieted, rather than angry. When she took up the pleasant letter in which the English breezes were blowing, and the leaves rustling, she could no longer keep her attention from wandering.

She began it a dozen times, and as often gave it up again, driven by the importunate thoughts which took her mind by storm, and thrust everything else away. As if it were not enough to have one great annoyance suddenly overwhelming her, she had the standing terror of her life, the certainty that she should have to send her children away, thrown in to make up. She could have cried, had that been of any use; but Mrs. Ochterlony had had good occasion to cry many times in her life, which takes away the inclination at less important moments. The worst of all was that her husband's oft-repeated suggestion struck at the very roots of her existence, and seemed to throw everything of which she had been most sure into sudden ruin. She would put no faith in it — pay no attention to it, she said to herself; and then, in spite of herself, she found that she paid great attention, and could not get it out of her mind. The only character in which she knew herself — in which she had ever been known — was that of a wife. There are some women — nay, many women — who have felt their own independent standing before they made the first great step in a woman's life, and who are able to realize their own identity without associating it for ever with that of any other. But as for Mary, she had married, as it were, out of the nursery, and except as Hugh Ochterlony's wife, and his son's mother, she did not know herself. In such circumstances, it may be imagined what a bewildering effect any doubt about her marriage would have upon her. For the first time she began to think of herself, and to see that she had been hardly dealt with. She began to resent her guardian's carelessness, and to blame even kind Aunt Agatha, who in those days was

taken up with some faint love-affairs of her own, which never came to anything. Why did not they see that everything was right? Why did not Hugh make sure, whose duty it was? After she had vexed herself with such thoughts, she returned with natural inconsistency to the conclusion that it was all one of the Major's notions. This was the easiest way of getting rid of it, and yet it was aggravating enough that the Major should permit his restless fancy to enter such sacred ground, and to play with the very foundations of their life and honour. And as if that was not enough, to talk at the end of it all of sending Hugh away!

Perhaps it would have been good for Mary if she had taken her husband's advice and lain down, and sent over to Miss Sorbette for a novel. But she was rebellious and excited, and would not do it. It was true that they were engaged out to dinner that night, and that when the hour came Mrs. Ochterlony entered Mrs. Hesketh's drawing-room with her usual composure, and without any betrayal of the agitation that was still smouldering within. But that did not make it any easier for her. There was nobody more respected, as people say, in the station than she was — and to think that it was possible that such a thing might be, as that she should be humiliated and pulled down from her fair elevation among all those women! Neither the Major nor any man had a right to have notions upon a matter of such importance. Mary tried hard to calm herself down to her ordinary tranquillity, and to represent to herself how good he was, and how small a drawback after all were those fidgets of his, in comparison with the faults of most other men. Just as he represented to himself, with

more success, how trifling a disadvantage was the "little temper" which gave him the privilege now and then, of feeling tenderly superior to his wife. But the attempt was not successful that day in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind; for after all there are some things too sacred for discussion, and with which the most fidgety man in the world cannot be permitted to play. Such was the result of the first conversation upon this startling subject. The Major found himself very tolerably at his case, having relieved his mind for the moment, and enjoyed his dinner and spent a very pleasant evening; but as for Madonna Mary, she might have prejudiced her serene character in the eyes of the regiment had the veil been drawn aside only for a moment, and could anybody have seen or guessed the whirl of thoughts that was passing through her uneasy mind.

CHAPTER III.

The present writer has already lamented her inability to convey to the readers of this history any clear account of an Indian bungalow, or the manner in which life goes on in that curious kind of English home: so that it would be vain to attempt any detailed description of Mary Ochterlony's life at this period of her career. She lived very much as all the others lived, and gave a great deal of attention to her two little boys, and wrote regularly by every mail to her friends in England, and longed for the days when the mail came in, though the interest of her correspondence was not absorbing. All this she did like everybody else, though

the other ladies at the station had perhaps more people belonging to them, and a larger number of letters, and got more good of the eagerly looked-for mail. And she read all the books she could come by, even Miss Sorbette's novels, which were indeed the chief literary nourishment of the station; and took her due share in society, and was generally very popular, though not so superior as Miss Sorbette for example, nor of remarkable piety like Mrs. Kirkman, nor nearly so well off as Mrs. Hesketh. Perhaps these three ladies, who were the natural leaders of society, liked Mary all the better because she did not come in direct contact with their claims; though if it had ever entered into Mrs. Ochterlony's head to set up a distinct standard, no doubt the masses would have flocked to it, and the peace of the station might have been put in jeopardy. But as no such ambitious project was in her mind, Mary kept her popularity with everybody, and gained besides that character of "She could an if she would," which goes a great deal farther than the limited reputation of any actual achievement. She was very good to the new people, the young people, the recent arrivals, and managed to make them feel at home sooner than anybody else could, which was a very useful gift in such a society; and then a wife who bore her husband's fidgets so serenely was naturally a model and example for all the new wives.

"I am sure nobody else in the station could do so well," Mrs. Kirkman said. "The most experienced Christian would find it a trying task. But then some people are so mercifully fitted for their position in life. I don't think she feels it as you or I should." This was said, not as implying that little Mrs. Askell — to

whom the words were ostensibly addressed — had peculiarly sensitive feelings, or was in any way to be associated with the Colonel's wife, but only because it was a favourite way Mrs. Kirkman had of bringing herself down to her audience, and uniting herself, as it were, to ordinary humanity; for if there was one thing more than another for which she was distinguished, it was her beautiful Christian humility; and this was the sense in which she now spoke.

"Please don't say so," cried the ensign's wife, who was an unmanageable, eighteen-year-old, half-Irish creature. "I am sure she has twenty thousand times more feeling than you and — than both of us put together. It's because she is real good; and the Major is an old dear. He *is* a fidget and he's awfully aggravating, and he puts one in a passion; but he's an old dear, and so you would say if you knew him as well as I."

Mrs. Kirkman regarded the creature by her side, as may be supposed, with the calm contempt which her utterance merited. She looked at her, out of those "down-dropt," half-veiled eyes, with that look which everybody in the station knew so well, as if she were looking down from an infinite distance with a serene surprise which was too far off and elevated to partake of the nature of disgust. If *she* knew him as well as this baby did! But the Colonel's wife did not take any notice of the audacious suggestion. It was her duty, instead of resenting the impertinence to herself, to improve the occasion for the offender's own sake.

"My dear, there is nobody really good," said Mrs. Kirkman. "We have the highest authority for that.

I wish I could think dear Mary was possessed of the true secret of a higher life; but she has so much of that natural amiability, you know, which is, of all things, the most dangerous for the soul. I would rather, for my part, she was not so 'good' as you say. It is all filthy rags," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a sigh. "It might be for the good of her soul to be brought low, and forced to abandon these refuges of lies ——"

Upon which the little Irish wild-Indian blazed up with natural fury.

"I don't believe she ever told a lie in her life. I'll swear to all the lies she tells," cried the foolish little woman; "and as for rags — it's horrible to talk so. If you only knew — if you only could think — how kind she was to me!"

For this absurd little hapless child had had a baby, as might have been expected, and would have been in rags indeed, and everything that is miserable, but for Mary, who had taken her in hand; and being not much more than a baby herself, and not strong yet, and having her heart in her mouth, so to speak, she burst out crying, as might have been expected too.

This was a result which her companion had not in the least calculated upon, for Mrs. Kirkman, notwithstanding her belief in Mary's insensibility, had not very lively feelings, and was not quick at divining other people. But she was a good woman notwithstanding all her talk. She came down off her mountain top, and soothed her little visitor, and gave her a glass of wine, and even kissed her, to make matters up.

"I know she has a way, when people are sick," said the Colonel's wife; and then, after that confession,

she sighed again. "If only she does not put her trust in her own works," Mrs. Kirkman added.

For, to tell the truth, the Chaplain of the regiment was not (as she thought) a spiritual-minded man, and the Colonel's wife was troubled by an abiding consciousness that it was into her hands that Providence had committed the souls of the station. "Which was an awful responsibility for a sinful creature," she said, in her letters home; "and one that required constant watch over herself."

Perhaps, in a slightly different way, Mrs. Ochterlony would have been similarly put down and defended in the other two centres of society at the station. "She is intelligent," Miss Sorbette said; "I don't deny that she is intelligent; but I would not say she was superior. She is fond of reading, but then most people are fond of reading, when it's amusing, you know. She is a little too like Amelia in 'Vanity Fair.' She is one of the sweet women. In a general way, I can't bear sweet women; but I must confess she is the very best specimen I ever saw."

As for Mrs. Hesketh, her opinion was not much worth stating in words. If she had any fault to find with Mrs. Ochterlony, it was because Mary had sometimes a good deal of trouble in making the two ends meet. "I cannot endure people that are always having anxieties," said the rich woman of the station, who had an idea that everybody could be comfortable if they liked, and that it was an offence to all his neighbours when a man insisted on being poor; but at the same time everybody knew that she was very fond of Mary. This had been the general opinion of her for all these years, and naturally Mrs. Ochterlony was used to it,

and, without being at all vain on the subject, had that sense of the atmosphere of general esteem and regard which surrounded her, which has a favourable influence upon every character, and which did a great deal to give her the sweet composure and serenity for which she was famed.

But from the time of that first conversation with her husband, a change came upon the Madonna of the station. It was not perceptible to the general vision, yet there were individual eyes which found out that something was the matter, though nobody could tell what. Mrs. Hesketh thought it was an attack of fever coming on, and Mrs. Kirkman hoped that Mrs. Ochterlony was beginning to occupy herself about her spiritual state; and the one recommended quinine to Mary, and the other sent her sermons, which, to tell the truth, were not much more suitable to her case. But Mary did not take any of the charitable friends about her into her confidence. She went about among them as a prince might have gone about in his court, or a chief among his vassals, after hearing in secret that it was possible that one day he may be discovered to be an impostor. Or, if not that, — for Mary knew that she never could be found out an impostor, — at least, that such a charge was hanging over her head, and that somebody might believe it; and that her history would be discussed and her name get into people's mouths and her claims to their regard be questioned. It was very hard upon her to think that such a thing was possible with composure, or to contemplate her husband's restless ways, and to recollect the indiscreet confidences which he was in the habit of making. He had spoken to Colonel Kirkman about it, and even

quoted his advice about the marriage lines; and Mary could not but think (though in this point she did the Colonel injustice) that Mrs. Kirkman too must know; and then, with a man of Major Ochterlony's temperament, nobody could make sure that he would not take young Askell, the ensign, or any other boy in the station, into his confidence, if he should happen to be in the way. All this was very galling to Mary, who had so high an appreciation of the credit and honour which, up to this moment, she had enjoyed; and who felt that she would rather die than come down to be discussed and pitied and talked about among all these people. She thought in her disturbed and uneasy mind, that she could already hear all the different tones in which they would say, "Poor Mary!" and all the wonders, and doubts, and inquiries that would rise up round her. Mrs. Kirkman would have said that all these were signs that her pride wanted humbling, and that the thing her friends should pray for, should be some startling blow to lead her back to a better state of mind. But naturally this was a kind of discipline which for herself, or indeed for anybody else, Mary was not far enough advanced to desire.

Perhaps, however, it was partly true about the pride. Mrs. Ochterlony did not say anything about it, but she locked the door of her own room the next morning after that talk with the Major, and searched through all her repositories for those "marriage lines," which no doubt she had put away somewhere, and which she had naturally forgotten all about for years. It was equally natural, and to be expected, that she should not find them. She looked through all her papers, and letters, and little sacred corners, and found

many things that filled her heart with sadness and her eyes with tears — for she had not come through those ten years without leaving traces behind her where her heart had been wounded and had bled by the way — but she did not find what she was in search of. She tried hard to look back and think, and to go over in her mind the contents of her little school-girl desk, which she had left at Aunt Agatha's cottage, and the little work-table, and the secretary with all its drawers. But she could not recollect anything about it, nor where she had put it, nor what could have become of it; and the effect of her examination was to give her, this time in reality, a headache, and to make her eyes heavy and her heart sore. But she did not say a syllable about her search to the Major, who was (as, indeed, he always was) as anxiously affectionate as a man could be, and became (as he always did) when he found his wife suffering, so elaborately noiseless and still, that Mary ended by a good fit of laughing, which was of the greatest possible service to her.

"When you are so quiet, you worry me, Hugh," she said. "I am used to hear you moving about."

"My dear, I hope I am not such a brute as to move about when you are suffering," her husband replied. And though his mind had again begun to fill with the dark thoughts that had been the occasion of all Mary's annoyance, he restrained himself with a heroic effort, and did not say a syllable about it all that night.

But this was a height of virtue which it was quite impossible any merely mortal powers could keep up to. He began to make mysterious little broken speeches next day, and to stop short and to say, "My darling,

I mustn't worry *you*," and to sigh like a furnace, and to worry Mary to such an extremity that her difficulty in keeping her temper and patience grew indescribable. And then, when he had afflicted her in this way till it was impossible to go any further — when he had betrayed it to her in every look, in every step, in every breath he drew — which was half a sigh — and in every restless movement he made; and when Mrs. Ochterlony, who could not sleep for it, nor rest, nor get any relief from the torture, had two red lines round her eyes, and was all but out of her senses — the stream burst forth at last, and the Major spoke:

"You remember, perhaps, Mary, what we were talking of the other day," he said, in an insidiously gentle way, one morning, early — when they had still the long, long day before them to be miserable in. "I thought it very important, but perhaps you may have forgot — about old Sommerville who died?"

"Forgot!" said Mary. She felt it was coming now, and was rather glad to have it over. "I don't know how I could forget, Hugh. What you said would have made one recollect anything; but you cannot make old Sommerville come alive again, whatever you do."

"My dear, I spoke to you about some — about a — paper," said the Major. "Lines — that is what the Scotch call them — though, I daresay, they're very far from being poetry. Perhaps you have found them, Mary?" said Major Ochterlony, looking into her face in a pleading way, as if he prayed her to answer yes. And it was with difficulty that she kept as calm as she wished to do, and answered without letting him see the agitation and excitement in her mind.

"I don't know where I have put them," Hugh

she said, with a natural evasion, and in a low voice. She did not acknowledge having looked for them, and having failed to find them; but in spite of herself, she answered with a certain humility, as of a woman culpable. For, after all, it was her fault.

"You don't know where you put them?" said the Major, with rising horror. "Have you the least idea how important they are? They may be the saving of you and of your children, and you don't know where you have put them! Then it is all as I feared," Major Ochterlony added, with a groan, "and everything is lost."

"What is lost?" said Mary. "You speak to me in riddles, Hugh. I know I put them somewhere — I must have put them somewhere safe. They are, most likely, in my old desk at home, or in one of the drawers of the secretary," said Mary calmly, giving those local specifications with a certainty which she was far from feeling. As for the Major, he was arrested by the circumstance which made her faint hope and supposition look somehow like truth.

"If I could hope that *that* was the case," he said; "but it can't be the case, Mary. You never were at home after we were married — you forget that. We went to Earlston for a day, and we went to your guardian's; but never to Aunt Agatha. You are making a mistake, my dear; and God bless me, to think of it, what would become of you if anything were to happen to me?"

"I hope there is nothing going to happen to you; but I don't think in that case it would matter what became of me," said Mary in utter depression; for by this time she was worn out.

"You think so now, my love; but you would be

obliged to think otherwise," said Major Ochterlony. "I hope I'm all right for many a year; but a man can never tell. And the insurance, and pension, and everything — and Earlston, if my brother should leave it to us — all your future, my darling. I think it will drive me distracted," said the Major, not a witness nor a proof left!"

Mary could make no answer. She was quite overwhelmed by the images thus called before her; for her part, the pension and the insurance money had no meaning to her ears; but it is difficult not to put a certain faith in it when a man speaks in such a circumstantial way of things that can only happen after his death.

"You have been talking to the doctor, and he has been putting things into your head," she said faintly. "It is cruel to torture me so. We know very well how we were married, and all about it, and so do our friends, and it is cruel to try to make me think of anything happening. There is nobody in the regiment so strong and well as you are," she continued, taking courage a little. She thought to herself he looked, as people say, the picture of health, as he sat beside her, and she began to recover out of her prostration. As for spleen or liver, or any of those uncomfortable attributes, Major Ochterlony, up to this moment, had not known whether he possessed them — which was a most re-assuring thought, naturally, for his anxious wife.

"Thank God," said the Major with a little solemnity. It was not that he had any presentiment, or thought himself likely to die early; but simply that he was in a pathetic way, and had a *naïf* and innocent pleasure in deepening his effects; and then he took to

walking about the room in his nervous manner. After a while he came to a dead stop before his wife, and took both her hands into his.

"Mary," he said, "I know it's an idea that you don't like; but, for my peace of mind; suppose — just suppose for the sake of supposing — that I was to die now, and leave you without a word to prove your claims. It would be ten times worse than death, Mary; but I could die at peace if you would only make one little sacrifice to my peace of mind."

"Oh, Hugh, don't kill me — you are not going to die," was all Mary could say.

"No, my darling, not if I can help it; but if it were only for my peace of mind. There's no harm in it that I can see. It's ridiculous, you know; but that's all, Mary," said the Major, looking anxiously in her face. "Why, it is what hosts of people do every day. It is the easiest thing to do — a mere joke, for that matter. They will say, you know, that it is like Ochterlony, and a piece of his nonsense. I know how they talk; but never mind. I know very well there is nothing else that you would not do for my peace of mind. It will set your future above all casualties, and it will be all over in half an hour. For instance, Churchill says ——"

"You have spoken to Mr. Churchill, too?" said Mary, with a thrill of despair.

"A man can never do any harm speaking to his clergyman, I hope," the Major said, peevishly. "What do you mean by *too*? I've only mentioned it to Kirkman besides — I wanted his advice — and to Sorbette, to explain that bad headache of yours. And they all think I am perfectly right."

Mary put her hands up to her face, and gave a low but bitter cry. She said nothing more — not a syllable. She had already been dragged down without knowing it, and set low among all these people. She who deserved nothing but honour, who had done nothing to be ashamed of, who was the same Madonna Mary whom they had all regarded as the "wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best." By this time they had all begun to discuss her story, and to wonder if all *had* been quite right at the beginning, and to say, "Poor Mary!" She knew it as well as if she had heard the buzz of talk in those three houses to which her husband had confided his difficulty. It was a horrible torture, if you will but think of it, for an innocent woman to bear.

"It is not like you to make such a fuss about so simple a thing," said Major Ochterlony. "You know very well it is not myself but you I am thinking of; that you may have everything in order, and your future provided for, whatever may happen. It may be absurd, you know; but a woman mustn't mind being absurd to please her husband. We'll ask our friends to step over with us to church in the morning, and in half an hour it will be all over. Don't cover your face, Mary. It worries me not to see your face. God bless me, it is nothing to make such a fuss about," said the Major, getting excited. "I would do a great deal more, any day, to please you."

"I would cut off my hand to please you," said Mary, with perhaps a momentary extravagance in the height of her passion. "You know there is no sacrifice I would not make for you; but oh, Hugh, not this, not this," she said, with a sob that startled him — one

of those sobs that tear and rend the breast they come from, and have no accompaniment of tears.

His answer was to come up to her side, and take the face which she had been covering, between his hands, and kiss it as if it had been a child's. "My darling, it is only this that will do me any good. It is for my peace of mind," he said, with all that tenderness and effusion which made him the best of husbands. He was so loving to her that, even in the bitterness of the injury, it was hard for Mary to refuse to be soothed and softened. He had got his way, and his unbounded love and fondness surrounded her with a kind of atmosphere of tender enthusiasm. He knew so well there was none like her, nobody fit to be put for a moment in comparison with his Mary; and this was how her fate was fixed for her, and the crisis came to an end.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM going with you, Mary," said Mrs. Kirkman, coming suddenly in upon the morning of the day which was to give peace to Major Ochterlony's mind, and cloud over with something like a shadow of shame (or at least she thought so) his wife's fair matron fame. The Colonel's wife had put on her last white bonnet, which was not so fresh as it had been at the beginning of the season, and white gloves which were also a little the worse for wear. To be sure the marriage was not like a real marriage, and nobody knew how the unwilling bride would think proper to dress. Mrs. Kirkman came in at a quicker pace than ordinary, with her hair hanging half out of curl on either side of

her face, as was always the case. She was fair, but of a greyish complexion, with light blue eyes *à fleur de la tête*, which generally she kept half veiled within their lids — a habit which was particularly aggravating to some of the livelier spirits. She came in hastily (for her), and found Mary seated disconsolate, and doing nothing, which is, in such a woman, one of the saddest signs of a mind disturbed. Mrs. Ochterlony sat, dropped down upon a chair, with her hands listlessly clasped in her lap, and a hot flush upon her cheek. She was lost in a dreary contemplation of the sacrifice which was about to be exacted from her, and of the possible harm it might do. She was thinking of her children, what effect it might have on them — and she was thinking bitterly, that for good or evil she could not help it; that again, as on many a previous occasion, her husband's restless mind had carried the day over her calmer judgment, and that there was no way of changing it. To say that she consented with personal pain of the most acute kind, would not be to say all. She gave in, at the same time, with a foreboding utterly indistinct, and which she would not have given utterance to, yet which was strong enough to heighten into actual misery the pain and shame of her position. When Mrs. Kirkman came in, with her eyes full of observation, and making the keenest scrutiny from beneath the downcast lids, Mrs. Ochterlony was not in a position to hide her emotions. She was not crying, it is true, for the circumstances were too serious for crying; but it was not difficult to form an idea of her state of mind from her strangely listless attitude, and the expression of her face.

"I have come to go with you," said Mrs. Kirkman.

"I thought you would like to have somebody to countenance you. It will make no difference to me, I assure you, Mary; and both the Colonel and I think if there is *any* doubt, you know, that it is by far the wisest thing you could do. And I only hope ——"

"Doubt!" said Mary, lighting up for the moment. "There is no more doubt than there is of all the marriages made in Scotland. The people who go there to be married are not married again afterwards that I ever heard of. There is no doubt whatever — none in the world. I beg your pardon. I am terribly vexed and annoyed, and I don't know what I am saying. To hear any one talk of doubt!"

"My dear Mary, we *know* nothing but what the Major has told us," said Mrs. Kirkman. "You may depend upon it he has reason for what he is doing; and I do hope you will see a higher hand in it all, and feel that you are being humbled for your good."

"I wish you would tell me how it can be for my good," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "when even you, who ought to know better, talk of doubt — you who have known us all along from the very first. Hugh has taken it into his head — that is the whole matter; and you, all of you, know, when he takes a thing into his head ——"

She had been hurried on to say this, by the rush of her disturbed thoughts; but Mary was not a woman to complain of her husband. She came to a sudden standstill, and rose up, and looked at her watch.

"It is about time to go," she said, "and I am sorry to give you the trouble of going with me. It is not worth while for so short a distance; but, at least, don't say anything more about it, please."

Mrs. Kirkman had already made the remark that Mary was not at all "dressed." She had on her brown muslin, which was the plainest morning dress in her possession, as everybody knew; and instead of going to her room, to make herself a little nice, she took up her bonnet, which was on the table, and tied it on without even so much as looking into the glass. "I am quite ready," she said, when she had made this simple addition to her dress, and stood there, looking everything that was most unlike the Madonna of former days — flushed and clouded over, with lines in her forehead, and the corners of her mouth dropped, and her fair large serene beauty hidden beneath the thundercloud. And the Colonel's wife was very sorry to see her friend in such a state of mind, as may be supposed.

"My dear Mary," Mrs. Kirkman said, taking her arm as they went out, and holding it fast. "I should much wish to see you in a better frame of mind. Man is only the instrument in our troubles. It must have been that Providence saw you stood in need of it, my dear. He knows best. It would not have been sent if it had not been for your good."

"In that way, if I were to stand in the sun till I got a sunstroke, it would still be for my good," said Mary, in her anger. "You would say, it was God's fault, and not mine. But I know it is *my* fault; I ought to have stood out and resisted, and I have not had the strength; and it is not for good, but evil. It is not God's fault, but ours. It can be for nobody's good."

But after this, she would not say any more. Not though Mrs. Kirkman was shocked at her way of speak-

ing, and took great pains to impress upon her that she must have been doing or thinking something which God punished by this means. "Your pride must have wanted bringing down, my dear; as we all do, Mary, both you and I," said the Colonel's wife; but then Mrs. Kirkman's humility was well known.

Thus they walked together to the chapel, whither various wondering people, who could not understand what it meant, were straying. Major Ochterlony had meant to come for his wife, but he was late, as he so often was, and met them only near the chapel-door; and then he did something which sent the last pang of which it was capable to Mary's heart, though it was only at a later period that she found it out. He found his boy with the Hindoo nurse, and brought little Hugh in, 'wildered and wondering. Mr. Churchill by this time had put his surplice on, and all was ready. Colonel Kirkman had joined his wife, and stood by her side behind the "couple," furtively grasping his grey moustache, and looking out of a corner of his eyes at the strange scene. Mrs. Kirkman, for her part, dropt her eyelids as usual, and looked down upon Mary kneeling at her feet, with a certain compassionate uncertainty, sorry that Mrs. Ochterlony did not see this trial to be for her good, and at the same time wondering within herself whether it *had* all been perfectly right, or was not something more than a notion of the Major's. Farther back Miss Sorbette, who was with Annie Hesketh, was giving vent in a whisper to the same sentiments.

"I am very sorry for poor Mary; but *could* it be all quite right before?" Miss Sorbette was saying. "A man does not take fright like that for nothing. We

women are silly, and take fancies; but when a *man* does it, you know ——"

And it was with such an accompaniment that Mary knelt down, not looking like a Madonna, at her husband's side. As for the Major, an air of serenity had diffused itself over his handsome features. He knelt in quite an easy attitude, pleased with himself, and not displeased to be the centre of so interesting a group. Mary's face was slightly averted from him, and was burning with the same flush of indignation as when Mrs. Kirkman found her in her own house. She had taken off her bonnet and thrown it down by her side; and her hair was shining as if in anger and resistance to this fate, which, with closed mouth, and clasped hands, and steady front, she was submitting to, though it was almost as terrible as death. Such was the curious scene upon which various subaltern members of society at the station looked on with wondering eyes. And little Hugh Ochterlony stood near his mother with childish astonishment, and laid up the singular group in his memory, without knowing very well what it meant; but that was a sentiment shared by many persons much more enlightened than the poor little boy, who did not know how much influence this mysterious transaction might have upon his own fate.

The only other special feature was that Mary, with the corners of her mouth turned down, and her whole soul wound up to obstinacy, would not call herself by any name but Mary Ochterlony. They persuaded her, painfully, to put her long disused maiden name upon the register, and kind Mr. Churchill shut his ears to it in the service; but yet it was a thing that everybody remarked. When all was over, nobody knew how they

were expected to behave, whether to congratulate the pair, or whether to disappear and hold their tongues, which seemed in fact the wisest way. But no popular assembly ever takes the wisest way of working. Mr. Churchill was the first to decide the action of the party. He descended the altar steps, and shook hands with Mary, who stood tying her bonnet, with still the corners of her mouth turned down, and that feverish flush on her cheeks. He was a good man, though not spiritually-minded in Mrs. Kirkman's opinion; and he felt the duty of softening and soothing his flock as much as that of teaching them, which is sometimes a great deal less difficult. He came and shook hands with her, gravely and kindly.

"I don't see that I need congratulate you, Mrs. Ochterlony," he said, "I don't suppose it makes much difference; but you know you always have all our best wishes." And he cast a glance over his audience, and reproved by that glance the question that was circulating among them. But to tell the truth, Mrs. Kirkman and Miss Sorbette paid very little attention to Mr. Churchill's looks.

"My dear Mary, you have kept up very well, though I am sure it must have been trying," Mrs. Kirkman said. "Once is bad enough; but I am sure you will see a good end in it at the last."

And while she spoke she allowed a kind of silent interrogation, from her half-veiled eyes, to steal over Mary, and investigate her from head to foot. *Had* it been all right before? Might not this perhaps be in reality the first time, the once which was bad enough? The question crept over Mrs. Ochterlony, from the roots of her hair down to her feet, and examin-

curiously to find a response. The answer was plain enough, and yet it was not plain to the Colonel's wife; for she knew that the heart is deceitful above all things, and that where human nature is considered it is always safest to believe the worst.

Miss Sorbette came forward too in her turn, with a grave face. "I am sure you must feel more comfortable after it, and I am so glad you have had the moral courage," the doctor's sister said, with a certain solemnity. But perhaps it was Annie Hesketh, in her innocence, who was the worst of all. She advanced timidly, with her face in a blaze, like Mary's own, not knowing where to look, and lost in ingenuous embarrassment.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Ochterlony, I don't know what to say," said Annie. "I am so sorry, and I hope you will always be very, very happy; and mamma couldn't come——" Here she stopped short, and looked up with candid eyes, that asked a hundred questions. And Mary's reply was addressed to her alone.

"Tell your mamma, Annie, that I am glad she could not come," said the injured wife. "It was very kind of her." When she had said so much, Mrs. Ochterlony turned round, and saw her boy standing by, looking at her. It was only then that she turned to the husband to whom she had just renewed her troth. She looked full at him, with a look of indignation and dismay. It was the last drop that made the cup run over; but then, what was the good of saying anything? That final prick, however, brought her to herself. She shook hands with all the people afterwards, as if they were dispersing after an ordinary service, and took little Hugh's hand and went home as if nothing had

happened. She left the Major behind her, and took no notice of him, and did not even, as young Askell remarked, offer a glass of wine to the assistants at the ceremony, but went home with her little boy, talking to him, as she did on Sundays going home from church; and everybody stood and looked after her, as might have been expected. She knew they were looking after her, and saying "Poor Mary!" and wondering after all if there must not have been a very serious cause for this re-marriage. Mary thought to herself that she knew as well what they were saying as if she had been among them, and yet she was not entirely so correct in her ideas of what was going on as she thought.

In the first place, she could not have imagined how a moment could undo all the fair years of unblemished life which she had passed among them. She did not really believe that they would doubt her honour, although she herself felt it clouded; and at the same time she did not know the curious compromise between cruelty and kindness, which is all that their Christian feelings can effect in many commonplace minds, yet which is a great deal when one comes to think of it. Mrs. Kirkman, arguing from the foundation of the desperate wickedness of the human heart, had gradually reasoned herself into the belief that Mary had deceived her, and had never been truly an honourable wife; but notwithstanding this conclusion, which in the abstract would have made her cast off the culprit with utter disdain, the Colonel's wife paused, and was moved, almost in spite of herself, by the spirit of that faith which she so often wrapped up and smothered in disguising talk. She did not believe in Mary; but she did,

in a wordy, defective way, in Him who was the son of a woman, and who came not to condemn; and she could not find it in her heart to cast off the sinner. Perhaps if Mrs. Ochterlony had known this divine reason for her friend's charity, it would have struck a deeper blow than any other indignity to which she had been subjected. In all her bitter thoughts, it never occurred to her that her neighbour stood by her as thinking of those Marys who once wept at the Saviour's feet. Heaven help the poor Madonna, whom all the world had heretofore honoured! In all her thoughts she never went so far as that.

The ladies waited a little, and sent away Annie Hesketh, who was too young for scenes of this sort, though her mamma was so imprudent, and themselves laid hold of Mr. Churchill, when the other gentlemen had dispersed. Mr. Churchill was one of those mild missionaries who turn one's thoughts involuntarily to that much-abused, yet not altogether despicable institution of a celibate clergy. He was far from being celibate, poor man! He, or at least his wife, had such a succession of babies as no man could number. They had children at "home" in genteel asylums for the sons and daughters of the clergy, and they had children in the airiest costume at the station, whom people were kind to, and who were waiting their chance of being sent "home" too; and withal, there were always more arriving, whom their poor papa received with a mild despair. For his part, he was not one of the happy men who held appointments under the beneficent rule of the Company, nor was he a regimental chaplain. He was one of that hapless band who are always "doing duty" for other and better-off people. He was

almost too old now (though he was not old), and too much hampered and overlaid by children, to have much hope of anything better than "doing duty" all the rest of his life; and the condition of Mrs. Churchill, who had generally need of neighbourly help, and of the children, who were chiefly clothed — such clothing as it was — by the bounty of the Colonel's and Major's and Captain's wives, somehow seemed to give these ladies the upper hand of their temporary pastor. He managed well enough among the men, who respected his goodness, and recognised him to be a gentleman, notwithstanding his poverty; but he stood in terror of the women, who were more disposed to interfere, and who were kind to his family and patronized himself. He tried hard on this occasion, as on many others, to escape, but he was hemmed in, and no outlet was left him. If he had been a celibate brother, there can be little doubt it would have been he who would have had the upper hand; but with all his family burdens and social obligations, the despotism of the ladies of his flock came hard upon the poor clergyman; all the more that, poor though he was, and accustomed to humiliations, he had not learned yet to dispense with the luxury of feelings and delicacies of his own.

"Mr. Churchill, do give us your advice," said Miss Sorbette, who was first. "Do tell us what all this means? They surely must have told *you* at least the rights of it. Do you think they have really never been married all this time? Goodness gracious me! to think of us all receiving her, and petting her, and calling her Madonna, and all that, if this should be true! Do you think ——"

"I don't think anything but what Major Ochterlony

told me," said Mr. Churchill, with a little emphasis. "I have not the least doubt he told me the truth. The witnesses of their marriage are dead, and that wretched place at Gretna was burnt down, and he is afraid that his wife would have no means of proving her marriage in case anything happened to him. I don't know what reason there can be to suppose that Major Ochterlony, who is a Christian and a gentleman, said anything that was not true."

"My dear Mr. Churchill," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a sigh, "you are so charitable. If one could but hope that the poor dear Major was a true Christian, as you say. But one has no evidence of any vital change in his case. And, dear Mary! — I have made up my mind for one thing, that it shall make no difference to me. Other people can do as they like, but so far as I am concerned, I can but think of our Divine Example," said the Colonel's wife. It was a real sentiment, and she meant well, and was actually thinking as well as talking of that Divine Example; but still somehow the words made the blood run cold in the poor priest's veins.

"What can you mean, Mrs. Kirkman?" he said. "Mrs. Ochterlony is as she always was, a person whom we all may be proud to know."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Sorbette, who interrupted them both without any ceremony; "but that is not what I am asking. As for his speaking the truth as a Christian and a gentleman, I don't give much weight to that. If he has been deceiving us for all these years, you may be sure he would not stick at a fib to end off with. What is one to do? I don't believe it can have ever been a good marriage, for my part."

This was the issue to which she had come by dint of thinking it over and discussing it; although the doctor's sister, like the Colonel's wife, had got up that morning with the impression that Major Ochterlony's fidgets had finally driven him out of his senses, and that Mary was the most ill-used woman in the world.

"And I believe exactly the contrary," said the clergyman, with some heat. "I believe in an honourable man and a pure-minded woman. I had rather give up work altogether than reject such an obvious truth."

"Ah, Mr. Churchill," Mrs. Kirkman said again, "we must not rest in these vain appearances. We are all vile creatures, and the heart is deceitful above all things. I do fear that you are taking too charitable a view."

"Yes," said Mr. Churchill, but perhaps he made a different application of the words; "I believe that about the heart; but then it shows its wickedness generally in a sort of appropriate, individual way. I daresay *they* have their thorns in the flesh, like the rest; but it is not falsehood and wantonness that are their besetting sins," said the poor man, with a plainness of speech which put his hearers to the blush.

"Goodness gracious! remember that you are talking to ladies, Mr. Churchill," Miss Sorbette said, and put down her veil. It was not a fact he was very likely to forget; and then he put on his hat as they left the chapel, and hoped he was now free to go upon his way.

"Stop a minute, please," said Miss Sorbette. "I should like to know what course of action is going to

be decided on. I am very sorry for Mary, but so long as her character remains under this doubt ——"

"It shall make no difference to me," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I don't pretend to regulate anybody's actions, Sabina; but when one thinks of Mary of Bethany! She may have done wrong, but I hope this occurrence will be blessed to her soul. I felt sure she wanted something to bring her low, and make her feel her need," the Colonel's wife added, with solemnity; "and it is such a lesson for us all. In other circumstances, the same thing might have happened to you or me."

"It could never have happened to me," said Miss Sorbette, with sudden wrath; which was a fortunate diversion for Mr. Churchill. This was how her friends discussed her after Mary had gone away from her second wedding; and perhaps they were harder upon her than she had supposed even in her secret thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

But the worst of all to Mrs. Ochterlony was that little Hugh had been there — Hugh, who was six years old, and so intelligent for his age. The child was very anxious to know what it meant, and why she knelt by his father's side while all the other people were standing. Was it something particular they were praying for, which Mrs. Kirkman and the rest did not want? Mary satisfied him as she best could, and by-and-by he forgot, and began to play with his little brother as usual; but his mother knew that so strange a scene could not fail to leave some impression. She

sat by herself that long day, avoiding her husband for perhaps the first time in her life, and imagining a hundred possibilities to herself. It seemed to her as if everybody who ever heard of her henceforth must hear of this, and as if she must go through the world with a continual doubt upon her; and Mary's weakness was to prize fair reputation and spotless honour above everything in the world. Perhaps Mrs. Kirkman was not so far wrong after all, and there was a higher meaning in the unlooked-for blow that thus struck her at her tenderest point; but that was an idea she could not receive. She could not think that God had anything to do with her husband's foolish restlessness, and her own impatient submission. It was a great deal more like a malicious devil's work, than anything a beneficent providence could have arranged. This way of thinking was far from bringing Mary any consolation or solace, but still there was a certain reasonableness in her thoughts. And then an indistinct foreboding of harm to her children, she did not know what, or how to be brought about, weighed upon Mary's mind. She kept looking at them as they played beside her, and thinking how, in the far future, the meaning of that scene he had been a witness to might flash into Hugh's mind when he was a man, and throw a bewildering doubt upon his mother's name, which perhaps she might not be living to clear up; and these ideas stung her like a nest of serpents, each waking up and darting its venom to her heart at a separate moment. She had been very sad and very sorry many a time before in her life, — she had tasted all the usual sufferings of humanity; and yet she had never been what may be called *unhappy*, tortured from within and without, dis-

satisfied with herself and every thing about her. Major Ochterlony was in every sense of the word a good husband, and he had been Mary's support and true companion in all her previous troubles. He might be absurd now and then, but he never was anything but kind and tender and sympathetic, as was the nature of the man. But the special feature of this misfortune was that it irritated and set her in arms against him, that it separated her from her closest friend and all her friends, and that it made even the sight and thought of her children, a pain to her among all her other pains.

This was the wretched way in which Mary spent the day of her second wedding. Naturally, Major Ochterlony brought people in with him to lunch (probably it should be written tiffin, but our readers will accept the generic word), and was himself in the gayest spirits, and insisted upon champagne, though he knew they could not afford it. "We ate our real wedding breakfast all by ourselves in that villanous little place at Gretna," he said, with a boy's enthusiasm, "and had trout out of the Solway: don't you recollect, Mary? Such trout! What a couple of happy young fools we were; and if every Gretna Green marriage turned out like mine!" the Major added, looking at his wife with beaming eyes. She had been terribly wounded by his hand, and was suffering secret torture, and was full of the irritation of pain; and yet she could not so steel her heart as not to feel a momentary softening at sight of the love and content in his eyes. But though he loved her he had sacrificed all her scruples, and thrown a shadow upon her honour, and filled her heart with bitterness, to satisfy an unreasonable fancy of his own, and give peace, as he said, to his mind. All this was

very natural, but in the pain of the moment it seemed almost inconceivable to Mary, who was obliged to conceal her mortification and suffering, and minister to her guests as she was wont to do, without making any show of the shadow that she felt to have fallen upon her life.

It was, however, tacitly agreed by the ladies of the station to make no difference, according to the example of the Colonel's wife. Mrs. Kirkman had resolved upon that charitable course from the highest motives, but the others were perhaps less elevated in their principles of conduct. Mrs. Hesketh, who was quite a worldly-minded woman, concluded that it would be absurd for one to take any step unless they all did, and that on the whole, whatever were the rights of it, Mary could be no worse than she had been for all the long time they had known her. As for Miss Sorbette, who was strong-minded, she was disposed to consider that the moral courage the Ochterlonys had displayed in putting an end to an unsatisfactory state of affairs merited public appreciation. Little Mrs. Askell, for her part, rushed headlong as soon as she heard of it, which fortunately was not until it was all over, to see her suffering protectress. Perhaps it was at that moment, for the first time, that the ensign's wife felt the full benefit of being a married lady, able to stand up for her friend and stretch a small wing of championship over her. She rushed into Mrs. Ochterlony's presence and arms like a little tempest, and cried and sobbed and uttered inarticulate exclamations on her friend's shoulder, to Mary's great surprise, who thought something had happened to her. Fortunately the little eighteen-year-old matron, after the first incoherence was over, began to find out

that Mrs. Ochterlony looked the same as ever, and that nothing tragical could have happened, and so restrained the offer of her own countenance and support, which would have been more humbling to Mary than all the desertion in the world.

"What is the matter, my dear?" said Mrs. Ochterlony, who had regained her serene looks, though not her composed mind; and little Irish Emma, looking at her, was struck with such a sense of her own absurdity and temerity and ridiculous pretensions, that she very nearly broke down again.

"I've been quarrelling with Charlie," the quick-witted girl said, with the best grace she could, and added in her mind a secret clause to soften down the fiction, — "he is so aggravating; and when I saw my Madonna looking so sweet and so still ——"

"Hush!" said Mary, "there was no need for crying about that — nor for telling fibs either," she added, with a smile that went to the heart of the ensign's wife. "You see there is nothing the matter with me," Mrs. Ochterlony added; but notwithstanding her perfect composure it was in a harder tone.

"I never expected anything else," said the impetuous little woman; "as if any nonsense could do any harm to you! And I love the Major, and I always have stood up for him; but oh, I should just like for once to box his ears."

"Hush!" said Mary again; and then the need she had of sympathy prompted her for one moment to descend to the level of the little girl beside her, who was all sympathy and no criticism, which Mary knew to be a kind of friendship wonderfully uncommon in this world. "It did me no harm," she said, feeling a

certain relief in dropping her reserve, and making visible the one thing of which they were both thinking, and which had no need of being identified by name. "It did me no harm, and it pleased him. I don't deny that it hurt at the time," Mary added after a little pause, with a smile; "but that is all over now. You do not need to cry over me, my dear."

"I — cry over you," cried the prevaricating Emma, "as if such a thing had ever come into my head; but I *did* feel glad I was a married lady," the little thing added; and then saw her mistake, and blushed and faltered and did not know what to say next. Mrs. Ochterlony knew very well what her young visitor meant, but she took no notice, as was the wisest way. She had steeled herself to all the consequences by this time, and knew she must accustom herself to such allusions and to take no notice of them. But it was hard upon her, who had been so good to the child, to think that little Emma was glad she was a married lady, and could in her turn give a certain countenance. All these sharp, secret, unseen arrows went direct to Mary's heart.

But on the whole the regiment kept its word and made no difference. Mrs. Kirkman called every Wednesday and took Mary with her to the prayer-meeting which she held among the soldiers' wives, and where she said she was having much precious fruit; and was never weary of representing to her companion that she had need of being brought down and humbled, and that for her part she would rejoice in anything which would bring her dear Mary to a more serious way of thinking; which was an expression of feeling perfectly genuine on Mrs. Kirkman's part, though at

the same time she felt more and more convinced that Mrs. Ochterlony had been deceiving her, and was not by any means an innocent sufferer. The Colonel's wife was quite sincere in both these beliefs, though it would be hard to say how she reconciled them to each other; but then a woman is not bound to be logical, whether she belongs to the High or Low Church. At the same time she brought Mary sermons to read, with passages marked, which were adapted for both these states of feeling, — some consoling the righteous who were chastened because they were beloved, and some exhorting the sinners who had been long callous and now were beginning to awaken to a sense of their sins. Perhaps Mary, who was not very discriminating in point of sermon-books, read both with equal innocence, not seeing their special application: but she could scarcely be so blind when her friend discoursed at the Mothers' Meeting upon the Scripture Marys, and upon her who wept at the Saviour's feet. Mrs. Ochterlony understood then, and never forgot afterwards, that it was *that* Mary with whom, in the mind of one of her most intimate associates, she had come to be identified. Not the Mary blessed among women, the type of motherhood and purity, but the other Mary, who was forgiven much because she had much loved. That night she went home with a swelling heart, wondering over the great injustice of human ways and dealings, and crying within herself to the Great Spectator who knew all against the evil thoughts of her neighbours. Was that what they all believed of her, all these women? and yet she had done nothing to deserve it, not so much as by a light look, or thought, or word; and it was not as if she could defend herself, or convince them of

their cruelty: for nobody accused her, nobody reproached her — her friends, as they all said, made no difference. This was the sudden cloud that came over Mary in the very fairest and best moment of her life.

But as for the Major, he knew nothing about all that. It had been done for his peace of mind, and until the next thing occurred to worry him he was radiant with good-humour and satisfaction. If he saw at any time a cloud on his wife's face, he thought it was because of that approaching necessity which took the pleasure out of everything even to himself, for the moment, when he thought of it — the necessity of sending Hugh "home." "We shall still have Islay for a few years at least, my darling," he would say, in his affectionate way; "and then the baby," — for there was a baby, which had come some time after the event which we have just narrated. That too must have had something to do, no doubt, with Mary's low spirits. "He'll get along famously with Aunt Agatha, and get spoiled, that fellow will," the Major said; "and as for Islay, we'll make a man of him." And except at those moments, when, as we have just said, the thoughts of his little Hugh's approaching departure struck him, Major Ochterlony was as happy and light-hearted as a man who is very well off in all his domestic concerns, and getting on in his profession, and who has a pleasant consciousness of doing his duty to all men and a greatful sense of the mercies of God, should be, and naturally is. When two people are yoked for life together, there is generally one of the two who bears the burden, while the other takes things easy. Sometimes it is the husband, as is fit and right, who has the heavy weight on his shoulders; but sometimes, and

oftener than people think, it is the wife. And perhaps this was why Major Ochterlony was so frisky in his harness, and Madonna Mary felt her serenity fall into sadness, and was conscious of going on very slowly and heavily upon the way of life. Not that he was to blame, who was now, as always, the best husband in the regiment, or even in the world. Mary would not for all his fidgets, not for any reward, have changed him against Colonel Kirkman with his fishy eye, nor against Captain Hesketh's jolly countenance, nor for anybody else within her range of vision. He was very far from perfect, and in utter innocence had given her a wound which throbbed and bled daily whichever way she turned herself, and which she would never cease to feel all her life; but still at the same time he stood alone in the world, so far as Mary's heart was concerned: for true love is, of all things on earth, the most pertinacious and unreasonable, let the philosophers say what they will.

And then the baby, for his part, was not like what the other babies had been; he was not a great fellow, like Hugh and Islay; but puny and pitiful and weakly, — a little selfish soul that would leave his mother no rest. She had been content to leave the other boys to Providence and Nature, tending them tenderly, wholesomely, and not too much, and hoping to make men of them some day; but with this baby Mary fell to dreaming, wondering often as he lay in her lap what his future would be. She used to ask herself unconsciously, without knowing why, what his influence might be on the lives of his brothers, who were like and yet so unlike him: though when she roused up she rebuked herself, and thought how much more reason-

able it would be to speculate upon Hugh's influence, who was the eldest, or even upon Islay, who had the longest head in the regiment, and looked as if he meant to make some use of it one day. To think of the influence of little weakly Wilfrid coming to be of any permanent importance in the lives of those two strong fellows seemed absurd enough; and yet it was an idea which would come back to her, when she thought without thinking, and escaped as it were into a spontaneous state of mind. The name even was a weak-minded sort of name, and did not please Mary; and all sorts of strange fancies came into her head as she sat with the pitiful little peevish baby, who insisted upon having all her attention, lying awake and fractious upon her wearied knee.

Thus it was that the first important scene of her history came to an end, with thorns which she never dreamed of planted in Mrs. Ochterlony's way, and a still greater and more unthought-of cloud rising slowly upon the broken serenity of her life.

CHAPTER VI.

Everything however went on well enough at the station for some time after the great occurrence which counted for so much in Mrs. Ochterlony's history; and the Major was very peaceable, for him, and nothing but trifling matters being in his way to move him, had fewer fidgets than usual. To be sure he was put out now and then by something the Colonel said or did, or by Hesketh's well-off-ness, which had come to the

length of a moral peculiarity, and was trying to a man; but these little disturbances fizzed themselves out, and got done with without troubling anybody much. There was a lull, and most people were surprised at it, and disposed to think that something must be the matter with the Major; but there was nothing the matter. Probably it occurred to him now and then that his last great fidget had rather gone a step too far — but this is mere conjecture, for he certainly never said so. And then, after a while, he began to play, as it were, with the next grand object of uneasiness which was to distract his existence. This was the sending "home" of little Hugh. It was not that he did not feel to the utmost the blank this event would cause in the house, and the dreadful tug at his heart, and the difference it would make to Mary. But at the same time it was a thing that had to be done, and Major Ochterlony hoped his feelings would never make him fail in his duty. He used to feel Hugh's head if it was hot, and look at his tongue at all sorts of untimely moments, which Mary knew meant nothing, but yet which made her thrill and tremble to her heart; and then he would shake his own head and look sad. "I would give him a little quinine, my dear," he would say; and then Mary, out of her very alarm and pain, would turn upon him.

"Why should I give him quinine? It is time enough when he shows signs of wanting it. The child is quite well, Hugh." But there was a certain quiver in Mrs. Ochterlony's voice which the Major could not and did not mistake.

"Oh yes, he is quite well," he would reply; "come and let me feel if you have any flesh on your bones,

old fellow. He is awfully thin, Mary. I don't think he would weigh half so much as he did a year ago if you were to try. I don't want to alarm you, my dear; but we must do it sooner or later, and in a thing that is so important for the child, we must not think of ourselves," said Major Ochterlony; and then again he laid his hand with that doubting, experimenting look upon the boy's brow, to feel "if there was any fever," as he said.

"He is quite well," said Mary, who felt as if she were going distracted while this pantomime went on. "You do frighten me, though you don't mean it; but I *know* he is quite well."

"Oh yes," said Major Ochterlony, with a sigh; and he kissed his little boy solemnly, and set him down as if things were in a very bad way; "he is quite well. But I have seen when five or six hours have changed all that," he added with a still more profound sigh, and got up as if he could not bear further consideration of the subject, and went out and strolled into somebody's quarters, where Mary did not see how lighthearted he was half-an-hour after, quite naturally, because he had poured out his uneasiness, and a little more, and got quite rid of it, leaving her with the arrow sticking in her heart. No wonder that Mrs. Kirkman, who came in as the Major went out, said that even a very experienced Christian would have found it trying. As for Mary, when she woke up in the middle of the night, which little peevish Wilfrid gave her plenty of occasion to do, she used to steal off as soon as she had quieted that baby-tyrant, and look at her eldest boy in his little bed, and put her soft hand on his head, and stoop over him to listen to his breathing. And sometimes she

persuaded herself that his forehead *was* hot, which it was quite likely to be, and got no more sleep that night; though as for the Major, he was a capital sleeper. And then somehow it was not so easy as it had been to conclude that it was only his way; for after his way had once brought about such consequences as in that re-marriage which Mary felt a positive physical pain in remembering, it was no longer to be taken lightly. The consequence was, that Mrs. Ochterlony wound herself up, and summoned all her courage, and wrote to Aunt Agatha, though she thought it best, until she had an answer, to say nothing about it; and she began to look over all little Hugh's wardrobe, to make and mend, and consider within herself what warm things she conld get him for the termination of that inevitable voyage, and to think what might happen before she had these little things of his in her care again — how they would wear out and be replenished, and his mother have no hand in it — and how he would get on without her. She used to make pictures of the little forlorn fellow on shipboard, and how he would cry himself to sleep, till the tears came dropping on her needle and rusted it; and then would try to think how good Aunt Agatha would be to him, but was not to be comforted by that — not so much as she ought to have been. There was nothing in the least remarkable in all this, but only what a great many people have to go through, and what Mrs. Ochterlony no doubt would go through with courage when the inevitable moment came. It was the looking forward to and rehearsing it, and the Major's awful suggestions, and the constant dread of feeling little Hugh's head hot, or his tongue white, and thinking it was her fault — this was what

made it so hard upon Mary; though Major Ochterlony never meant to alarm her, as anybody might see.

"I think he should certainly go home," Mrs. Kirkman said. "It is a trial, but it is one of the trials that will work for good. I don't like to blame you, Mary, but I have always thought your children were a temptation to you; oh, take care! — if you were to make idols of them ——"

"I don't make idols of them," said Mrs. Ochterlony, hastily; and then she added, with an effort of self-control which stopped even the rising colour on her cheek, "You know I don't agree with you about these things." She did not agree with Mrs. Kirkman; and yet to tell the truth, where so much is concerned, it is a little hard for a woman, however convinced she may be of God's goodness, not to fail in her faith and learn to think that, after all, the opinion which would make an end of her best hopes and her surest confidence may be true.

"I know you don't agree with me," said the Colonel's wife, sitting down with a sigh. "Oh, Mary, if you only knew how much I would give to see you taking these things to heart — to see you not almost, but altogether such as I am," she added, with solemn pathos. "If you would but remember that these blessings are only lent us — that we don't know what day or hour they may be taken back again ——"

All this Mary listened to with a rising of nature in her heart against it, and yet with that wavering behind, — What if it might be true?

"Don't speak to me so," she said. "You always make me think that something is going to happen. As if God grudged us our little happiness. Don't talk

of lending and taking back again. If *He* is not a cheerful giver, who can be?" For she was carried away by her feelings, and was not quite sure what she was saying — and at the same time, it comes so much easier to human nature to think that God grudges and takes back again, and is not a cheerful giver. As for Mrs. Kirkman, she thought it sinful so much as to imagine anything of the kind.

"It grieves me to hear you speak in that loose sort of latitudinarian way," she said; "oh, my dear Mary, if you could only see how much need you have to be brought low. When one cross is not enough, another comes — and I feel that you are not going to be let alone. This trial, if you take it in a right spirit, may have the most blessed consequences. It must be to keep you from making an idol of him, my dear — for if he takes up your heart from better things ——"

What could Mary say? She stopped in her work to give her hands an impatient wring together, by way of expressing somehow in secret to herself the impatience with which she listened. Yet perhaps, after all, it might be true. Perhaps God was not such a Father as He, the supreme and all-loving, whom her own motherhood shadowed forth in Mary's heart, but such a one as those old pedant fathers, who took away pleasures and reclaimed gifts, for discipline's sake. Perhaps — for when a heart has everything most dear to it at stake, it has such a miserable inclination to believe the worst of Him who leaves his explanation to the end, — Mary thought perhaps it might be true, and that God her Father might be lying in wait for her somewhere to crush her to the ground for having too much pleasure in his gift, — which was the state

of mind which her friend, who was at the bottom of her heart a good woman, would have liked to bring about.

"I think it is simply because we are in India," said Mrs. Ochterlony, recovering herself; "it is one of the conditions of our lot. It is a very hard condition, but of course we have to bear it. I think, for my part, that God, instead of doing it to punish me, is sorry for me, and that He would mend it and spare us if something else did not make it necessary. But perhaps it is you who are right," she added, faltering again, and wondering if it was wrong to believe that God, in a wonderful supreme way, must be acting, somehow as in a blind ineffective way, she, a mother, would do to her children. But happily her companion was not aware of that profane thought. And then, Mrs. Hesketh had come in, who looked at the question from entirely a different point of view.

"We have all got to do it, you know," said that comfortable woman, "whether we idolize them or not. I don't see what that has to do with it; but then I never do understand *you*. The great thing is, if you have somebody nice to send them to. One's mother is a great comfort for that; but then, there is one's husband's friends to think about. I am not sure, for my own part, that a good school is not the best. *That* can't offend anybody, you know; neither your own people, nor *his;* and then they can go all round in the holidays. Mine have all got on famously," said Mrs. Hesketh; and nobody who looked at her could have thought anything else. Though, indeed, Mrs. Hesketh's well-off-ness was not nearly so disagreeable or offensive to other people as her husband's, who had his balance

at his banker's written on his face; whereas in her case it was only evident that she was on the best of terms with her milliner and her jeweller, and all her tradespeople, and never had any trouble with her bills. Mary sat between the woman who had no children, and who thought she made idols of her boys — and the woman who had quantities of children, and saw no reason why anybody should be much put out of their way about them; and neither the one nor the other knew what she meant, any more than she perhaps knew exactly what they meant, though, as was natural, that latter idea did not much strike her. And the sole strengthening which Mrs. Ochterlony drew from this talk was a resolution never to say anything more about it; to keep what she was thinking of to herself, and shut another door in her heart, which, after all, is a process which has to be pretty often repeated as one goes through the world.

"But Mary has no friends — no *female* friends, poor thing. It is so sad for a girl when that happens, and accounts for so many things," the Colonel's wife said, dropping the lids over her eyes, and with an imperceptible shake of her head, which brought the little chapel and the scene of her second marriage in a moment before Mary's indignant eyes; "but there is one good even in that, for it gives greater ground for faith; when we have nothing and nobody to cling to ——"

"We were talking of the children," Mrs. Hesketh broke in calmly. "If I were you I should keep Hugh until Islay was old enough to go with him. They are such companions to each other, you know, and two children don't cost much more than one. If I were you, Mary, I would send the two together. I always

did it with mine. And I am sure you have somebody that will take care of them; one always has somebody in one's eye; and as for female friends ——"

Mary stopped short the profanity which doubtless her comfortable visitor was about to utter on this subject. "I have nothing but female friends," said she, with a natural touch of sharpness in her voice. "I have an aunt and a sister who are my nearest relatives — and it is there Hugh is going," for the prick of offence had been good for her nerves, and strung them up.

"Then I can't see what you have to be anxious about," said Mrs. Hesketh; "some people always make a fuss about things happening to children; why should anything happen to them? mine have had everything, I think, that children can have, and never been a bit the worse; and though it makes one uncomfortable at the time to think of their being ill, and so far away if anything should happen, still, if you know they are in good hands, and that everything is done that can be done —— And then, one never hears till the worst is over," said the well-off woman, drawing her lace shawl round her. "Good-by, Mary, and don't fret; there is nothing that is not made worse by fretting about it; I never do, for my part."

Mrs. Kirkman threw a glance of pathetic import out of the corners of her down-dropped eyes at the large departing skirts of Mary's other visitor. The Colonel's wife was one of the people who always stay last, and her friends generally cut their visits short when they encountered her, with a knowledge of this peculiarity, and at the same time an awful sense of something that would be said when they had withdrawn. "Not that I care for what she says," Mrs.

Hesketh murmured to herself as she went out, "and Mary ought to know better at least;" but at the same time, society at the station, though it was quite used to it, did not like to think of the sigh, and the tender, bitter lamentations which would be made over them when they took their leave. Mrs. Hesketh was not sensitive, but she could not help feeling a little aggrieved, and wondering what special view of her evil ways her regimental superior would take this time — for in so limited a community, everybody knew about everybody, and any little faults one might have were not likely to be hid.

Mrs. Kirkman had risen too, and when Mary came back from the door the Colonel's wife came and sat down beside her on the sofa, and took Mrs. Ochterlony's hand. She would be very nice, if she only took a little thought about the one thing needful," said Mrs. Kirkman, with the usual sigh. "What does it matter about all the rest? Oh, Mary, if we could only choose the good part which cannot be taken away from us!"

"But surely, we all try a little after that," said Mary. "She is a kind woman, and very good to the poor. And how can we tell what her thoughts are? I don't think we ever understand each other's thoughts."

"I never pretend to understand. I judge according to the Scripture rule," said Mrs. Kirkman; "you are too charitable, Mary; and too often, you know, charity only means laxness. Oh, I cannot tell you how those people are all laid upon my soul! Colonel Kirkman being the principal officer, you know, and so little real Christian work to be expected from Mr. Churchill, the responsibility is terrible. I feel sometimes as if I must

die under it. If their blood should be demanded at my hands!"

"But surely God must care a little about them Himself," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "Dont you think so? I cannot think that He has left it all upon you ——"

"Dear Mary, if you but give me the comfort of thinking I had been of use to *you*," said Mrs. Kirkman, pressing Mary's hand. And when she went away she believed that she had done her duty by Mrs. Ochterlony at least; and felt that perhaps, as a brand snatched from the burning, this woman, who was so wrapped up in regard for the world and idolatry of her children, might still be brought into a better state. From this it will be seen that the painful impression made by the marriage had a little faded out of the mind of the station. It was there, waiting any chance moment or circumstance that might bring the name of Madonna Mary into question; but in the meantime, for the convenience of ordinary life, it had been dropped. It was a nuisance to keep up a sort of shadowy censure which never came to anything, and by tacit consent the thing had dropped. For it was a very small community, and if any one had to be tabooed, the taboo must have been complete and crushing, and nobody had the courage for that. And so gradually the cloudiness passed away like a breath on a mirror, and Mary to all appearance was among them as she had been before. Only no sort of compromise could really obliterate the fact from anybody's recollection, or above all from her own mind.

And Mary went back to little Hugh's wardrobe when her visitors were gone, with that sense of having shut another door in her heart which has already been

mentioned. It is so natural to open all the doors and leave all the chambers open to the day; but when people walk up to the threshold and look in and turn blank looks of surprise or sad looks of disapproval upon you, what is to be done but to shut the door? Mrs. Ochterlony thought as most people do, that it was almost incredible that her neighbours did not understand what she meant; and she thought too, like an inexperienced woman, that this was an accident of the station, and that elsewhere other people knew better, which was a very fortunate thought, and did her good. And so she continued to put her boy's things in order, and felt half angry when she saw the Major come in, and knew beforehand that he was going to resume his pantomime with little Hugh, and to try if his head was hot and look at his tongue. If his tongue turned out to be white and his head feverish, then Mary knew that he would think it was her fault, and began to long for Aunt Agatha's letter, which she had been fearing, and which might be looked for by the next mail.

As for the Major, he came home with the air of a man who has hit upon a new trouble. His wife saw it before he had been five minutes in the house. She saw it in his eyes, which sought her and retired from her in their significant restless way, as if studying how to begin. In former days Mrs. Ochterlony, when she saw this, used to help her husband out; but recently she had had no heart for that, and he was left unaided to make a beginning for himself. She took no notice of his fidgeting, nor of the researches he made all about the room, and all the things he put out of their places. She could wait until he informed her what it was. But Mary felt a little nervous until such time as

her husband had seated himself opposite her, and began to pull her working things about, and to take up little Hugh's linen blouses which she had been setting in order. Then the Major heaved a demonstrative sigh. He meant to be asked what it meant, and even gave a glance up at her from the corner of his eye to see if she remarked it, but Mary was hard-hearted and would take no notice. He had to take all the trouble himself.

"He will want warmer things when he goes home," said the Major. "You must write to Aunt Agatha about that, Mary. I have been thinking a great deal about his going home. I don't know how I shall get on without him, nor you either, my darling; but it is for his good. How old is Islay?" Major Ochterlony added with a little abruptness: and then his wife knew what it was.

"Islay is not quite three," said Mary, quietly, as if the question was of no importance; but for all that her heart began to jump and beat against her breast.

"Three! and so big for his age," said the guilty Major, labouring with his secret meaning. "I don't want to vex you, Mary, my love, but I was thinking perhaps when Hugh went; it comes to about the same thing, you see — the little beggar would be dreadfully solitary by himself, and I don't see that it would make any difference to Aunt Agatha ——"

"It would make a difference to *me*," said Mary. "Oh, Hugh, don't be so cruel to me. I cannot let him go so young. If Hugh must go, it may be for *his* good — but not for Islay's, who is only a baby. He would not know us or have any recollection of us. Don't make me send both of my boys away."

"You would still have the baby," said the Major. "My darling, I am not going to do anything without your consent. Islay looked dreadfully feverish the other day, you know. I told you so; and as I was coming home I met Mrs. Hesketh ——"

"You took *her* advice about it," said Mary, with a little bitterness. As for the Major, he set his Mary a whole heaven above such a woman as Mrs. Hesketh, and yet he *had* taken her advice about it, and it irritated him a little to perceive his wife's tone of reproach.

"If I listened to her advice it was because she is a very sensible woman," said Major Ochterlony. "You are so heedless, my dear. When your children's health is ruined, you know, that is not the time to send them home. We ought to do it now, while they are quite well; though indeed I thought Islay very feverish the other night," he added, getting up again in his restless way. And then the Major was struck with compunction when he saw Mary bending down over her work, and remembered how constantly she was there, working for them, and how much more trouble those children cost her than they ever could cost him. "My love," he said, coming up to her and laying his hand caressingly upon her bent head, "my bonnie Mary! you did not think I meant that you cared less for them, or what was for their good, than I do? It will be a terrible trial; but then, if it is for their good and our own peace of mind ——"

"God help me," said Mary, who was a little beside herself. "I don't think you will leave me any peace of mind. You will drive me to do what I think wrong, or, if I don't do it, you will make me think that every-

thing that happens is my fault. You don't mean it, but you are cruel, Hugh."

"I am sure I don't mean it," said the Major, who, as usual, had had his say out; "and when you come to think —— but we will say no more about it to-night. Give me your book, and I will read to you for an hour or two. It is a comfort to come in to you and get a little peace. And after all, my love, Mrs. Hesketh means well, and she's a very sensible woman. I don't like Hesketh, but there's not a word to say against her. They are all very kind and friendly. We are in great luck in our regiment. Is this your mark where you left off? Don't let us say anything more about it, Mary, for to-night."

"No," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with a sigh; but she knew in her heart that the Major would begin to feel Islay's head, if it was hot, and look at his tongue, as he had done to Hugh's, and drive her out of her senses; and that, most likely, when she had come to an end of her powers, she would be beaten and give in at the last. But they said no more about it that night; and the Major got so interested in the book that he sat all the evening reading, and Mary got very well on with her work. Major Ochterlony was so interested that he even forgot to look as if he thought the children feverish when they came to say good night, which was the most wonderful relief to his wife. If thoughts came into her head while she trimmed Hugh's little blouses, of another little three-year-old traveller tottering by his brother's side, and going away on the stormy dangerous sea, she kept them to herself. It did not seem to her as if she could outlive the separation, nor how she could permit a ship so richly freighted

to sail away into the dark distance and the terrible storms; and yet she knew that she must outlive it, and that it must happen, if not now, yet at least some time. It is the condition of existence for the English sojourners in India. And what was she more than another, that any one should think there was any special hardship in her case?

CHAPTER VII.

The next mail was an important one in many ways. It was to bring Aunt Agatha's letter about little Hugh, and it did bring something which had still more effect upon the Ochterlony peace of mind. The Major, as has been already said, was not a man to be greatly excited by the arrival of the mail. All his close and pressing interests were at present concentrated in the station. His married sisters wrote to him now and then, and he was very glad to get their letters, and to hear when a new niece or nephew arrived, which was the general burden of these epistles. Sometimes it was a death, and Major Ochterlony was sorry; but neither the joy nor the sorrow disturbed him much. For he was far away, and he was tolerably happy himself, and could bear with equanimity the vicissitudes in the lot of his friends. But this time the letter which arrived was of a different description. It was from his brother, the head of the house — who was a little of an invalid and a good deal of a dilettante, and gave the Major no nephews or nieces, being indeed a confirmed bachelor of the most hopeless kind. He was a

man who never wrote letters, so that the communication was a little startling. And yet there was nothing very particular in it. Something had occurred to make Mr. Ochterlony think of his brother, and the consequence was that he had drawn his writing things to his hand and written a few kind words, with a sense of having done something meritorious to himself and deeply gratifying to Hugh. He sent his love to Mary, and hoped the little fellow was all right who was, he supposed, to carry on the family honours — "if there are any family honours," the Squire had said, not without an agreeable sense that there was something in his last paper on the "Coins of Agrippa," that the Numismatic Society would not willingly let die. This was the innocent morsel of correspondence which had come to the Major's hand. Mary was sitting by with the baby on her lap while he read it, and busy with a very different kind of communication. She was reading Aunt Agatha's letter which she had been dreading and wishing for, and her heart was growing sick over the innocent flutter of expectation and kindness and delight which was in it. Every assurance of the joy she would feel in seeing little Hugh, and the care she would take of him, which the simple-minded writer sent to be a comfort to Mary, came upon the mother's unreasonable mind like a kind of injury. To think that anybody could be happy about an occurrence that would be so terrible to her; to think anybody could have the bad taste to say that they looked with impatience for the moment that to Mary would be like dying! She was unhinged, and for the first time, perhaps, in her life, her nerves were thoroughly out of order, and she was unreasonable to the bottom of her

heart; and when she came to her young sister's gay announcement of what for *her* part she would do for her little nephew's education, and how she had been studying the subject ever since Mary's letter arrived, Mrs. Ochterlony felt as if she could have beaten the girl, and was ready to cry with wretchedness and irritation and despair. All these details served somehow to fix it, though she knew it had been fixed before. They told her the little room Hugh should have, and the old maid who would take care of him; and how he should play in the garden, and learn his lessons in Aunt Agatha's parlour, and all those details which would be sweet to Mary when her boy was actually there. But at present they made his going away so real, that they were very bitter to her, and she had to draw the astonished child away from his play, and take hold of him and keep him by her, to feel quite sure that he was still here, and not in the little North-country cottage which she knew so well. But this was an arrangement which did not please the baby, who liked to have his mother all to himself, and pushed Hugh away, and kicked and screamed at him lustily. Thus it was an agitated little group upon which the Major looked down as he turned from his brother's pleasant letter. He was in a very pleasant frame of mind himself, and was excessively entertained by the self-assertion of little Wilfrid on his mother's knee.

"He is a plucky little soul, though he is so small," said Major Ochterlony; "but Willie, my boy, there's precious little for you of the grandeurs of the family. It is from Francis, my dear. It's very surprising, you know, but still it's true. And he sends you his love. You know I always said that there was a great deal of

good in Francis; he is not a demonstrative man — but still, when you get at it, he has a warm heart. I am sure he would be a good friend to you, Mary, if ever —"

"I hope I shall never need him to be a good friend to me," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "He is your brother, Hugh, but you know we never got on." It was a perfectly correct statement of fact, but yet, perhaps, Mary would not have made it, had she not been so much disturbed by Aunt Agatha's letter. She was almost disposed to persuade herself for that moment that she had not got on with Aunt Agatha, which was a moral impossibility. As for the Major, he took no notice of his wife's little ill-tempered unenthusiastic speech.

"You will be pleased when you read it," he said. "He talks of Hugh quite plainly as the heir of Earlston. I can't help being pleased. I wonder what kind of Squire the little beggar will make: but we shall not live to see that — or, at least, *I* shan't," the Major went on, and he looked at his boy with a wistful look which Mary used to think of afterwards. As for little Hugh, he was very indifferent, and not much more conscious of the affection near home than of the inheritance far off. Major Ochterlony stood by the side of Mary's chair, and he had it in his heart to give her a little lesson upon her unbelief and want of confidence in him, who was always acting for the very best, and who thought much more of her interests than of his own.

"My darling," he said, in that coaxing tone which Mary knew so well, "I don't mean to blame you. It was a hard thing to make you do; and you might have thought me cruel and too precise. But only see

now how important it was to be exact about our marriage — *too* exact even. If Hugh should come into the estate —"

Here Major Ochterlony stopped short all at once, without any apparent reason. He had still his brother's letter in his hand, and was standing by Mary's side; and nobody had come in, and nothing had happened. But all at once, like a flash of lightning, something of which he had never thought before had entered his mind. He stopped short, and said, "Good God!" low to himself, though he was not a man who used profane expressions. His face changed as a summer day changes when the wind seizes it like a ghost, and covers its heavens with clouds. So great was the shock he had received, that he made no attempt to hide it, but stood gazing at Mary, appealing to her out of the midst of his sudden trouble. "Good God!" he said. His eyes went in a piteous way from little Hugh, who knew nothing about it, to his mother, who was at present the chief sufferer. Was it possible that instead of helping he had done his best to dishonour Hugh? It was so new an idea to him, that he looked helplessly into Mary's eyes to see if it was true. And she, for her part, had nothing to say to him. She gave a little tremulous cry which did but echo his own exclamation, and pitifully held out her hand to her husband. Yes; it was true. Between them they had sown thorns in their boy's path, and thrown doubt on his name, and brought humiliation and uncertainty into his future life. Major Ochterlony dropped into a chair by his wife's side, and covered his face with her hand. He was struck dumb by his discovery. It was only she who had seen it all long ago — to whom no sudden re-

velation could come — who had been suffering, even angrily and bitterly, but who was now altogether subdued and conscious only of a common calamity; who was the only one capable of speech or thought.

"Hugh, it is done now," said Mary; "perhaps it may never do him any harm. We are in India, a long way from all our friends. They know what took place in Scotland, but they can't know what happened here."

The Major only replied once more, "Good God!" Perhaps he was not thinking so much of Hugh as of the failure he had himself made. To think he should have landed in the most apparent folly by way of being wise — that perhaps was the immediate sting. But as for Mrs. Ochterlony, her heart was full of her little boy who was going away from her, and her husband's horror and dismay seemed only natural. She had to withdraw her hand from him, for the tyrant baby did not approve of any other claim upon her attention, but she caressed his stooping head as she did so. "Oh, Hugh, let us hope things will turn out better than we think," she said, with her heart overflowing in her eyes; and the soft tears fell on Wilfrid's little frock as she soothed and consoled him. Little Hugh for his part had been startled in the midst of his play, and had come forward to see what was going on. He was not particularly interested, it is true, but still he rather wanted to know what it was all about. And when the pugnacious baby saw his brother he returned to the conflict. It was his baby efforts with hands and feet to thrust Hugh away which roused the Major. He got up and took a walk about the room, sighing heavily. "When you saw what was involved, why did you let me do it, Mary?" he said, amid his sighs. That was all the advantage his

wife had from his discovery. He was still walking about the room and sighing, when the baby went to sleep, and Hugh was taken away; and then to be sure the father and mother were alone.

"*That* never came into my head," Major Ochterlony said, drawing a chair again to Mary's side. "When you saw the danger why did you not tell me? I thought it was only because you did not like it. And then, on the other side, if anything happened to me — Why did you let me do it when you saw that?" said the Major, almost angrily. And he drew another long impatient sigh.

"Perhaps it will do no harm, after all," said Mary, who felt herself suddenly put upon her defence.

"Harm! it is sure to do harm," said the Major. "It is as good as saying we were never married till now. Good heavens! to think you should have seen all that, and yet let me do it. We may have ruined him, for all we know. And the question is, what's to be done? Perhaps I should write to Francis, and tell him that I thought it best for your sake, in case anything happened to me — and as it was merely a matter of form, I don't see that Churchill could have any hesitation in striking it out of the register —"

"Oh, Hugh, let it alone now," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "It is done, and we cannot undo it. Let us only be quiet and make no more commotion. People may forget it, perhaps, if we forget it."

"Forget it!" the Major said, and sighed. He shook his head, and at the same time he looked with a certain tender patronage on Mary. "You may forget it, my dear, and I hope you will," he said, with a magnanimous pathos; "but it is too much to expect that I should

forget what may have such important results. I feel sure I ought to let Francis know. I daresay he could advise us what would be best. It is a very kind letter," said the Major; and he sighed, and gave Mary Mr. Ochterlony's brief and unimportant note with an air of resigned yet hopeless affliction, which half irritated her, and half awoke those possibilities of laughter which come "when there is little laughing in one's head," as we say in Scotland. She could have laughed, and she could have stormed at him; and yet in the midst of all she felt a poignant sense of contrast, and knew that it was she and not he who would really suffer — as it was he and not she who was in fault.

While Mary read Mr. Ochterlony's letter, lulling now and then with a soft movement the baby on her knee, the Major at the other side got attracted after a while by the pretty picture of the sleeping child, and began at length to forego his sighing, and to smoothe out the long white drapery that lay over Mary's dress. He was thinking no harm, the tender-hearted man. He looked at little Wilfrid's small waxen face pillowed on his mother's arm — so much smaller and feebler than Hugh and Islay had been, the great, gallant fellows — and his heart was touched by his little child. "My little man! *you* are all right, at least," said the inconsiderate father. He said it to himself, and thought, if he thought at all on the subject, that Mary, who was reading his brother's letter, did not hear him. And when Mrs. Ochterlony gave that cry which roused all the house and brought everybody trooping to the door, in the full idea that it must be a cobra at least, the Major jumped up to his feet as

much startled as any of them, and looked down to the floor and cried, "Where — what is it?" with as little an idea of what was the matter as the ayah who grinned and gazed in the distance. When he saw that instead of indicating somewhere a reptile intruder, Mary had dropped the letter and fallen into a weak outburst of tears, the Major was confounded. He sent the servants away, and took his wife in his arms and held her fast. "What is it, my love?" said the Major. "Are you ill? For Heaven's sake tell me what it is; my poor darling, my bonnie Mary!" This was how he soothed her, without the most distant idea what was the matter, or what had made her cry out. And when Mary came to herself, she did not explain very clearly. She said to herself that it was no use making him unhappy by the fantastical horror which had come into her mind with his words, or indeed had been already lurking there. And, poor soul, she was better when she had had her cry out, and had given over little Wilfrid, woke up by the sound, to his nurse's hands. She said, "Never mind me, Hugh; I am nervous, I suppose;" and cried on his shoulder as he never remembered her to have cried, except for very serious griefs. And when at last he had made her lie down, which was the Major's favourite panacea for all female ills of body or mind, and had covered her over, and patted and caressed and kissed her, Major Ochterlony went out with a troubled mind. It could not be anything in Francis's letter, which was a model of brotherly correctness, that had vexed or excited her: and then he began to think that for some time past her health had not been what it used to be. The idea disturbed him greatly, as may be supposed; for the thought of

Mary ailing and weakly, or perhaps ill and in danger, was one which had never yet entered his mind. The first thing he thought of was to go and have a talk with Sorbette, who ought to know, if he was good for anything, what it was.

"I am sure I don't know in the least what is the matter," the Major said. "She is not ill, you know. This morning she looked as well as ever she did, and then all at once gave a cry and burst into tears. It is so unlike Mary."

"It is very unlike her," said the doctor. "Perhaps you were saying something that upset her nerves."

"Nerves!" said the Major, with calm pride. "My dear fellow, you know that Mary has no nerves; she never was one of that sort of women. To tell the truth, I don't think she has ever been quite herself since that stupid business, you know."

"What stupid business?" said Mr. Sorbette.

"Oh, you know — the marriage, to be sure. A man looks very silly afterwards," said the Major with candour, "when he lets himself be carried away by his feelings. She ought not to have consented when that was her idea. I would give a hundred pounds I had not been so foolish. I don't think she has ever been quite herself since."

The doctor had opened *de grands yeux*. He looked at his companion as if he could not believe his ears. "Of course you would never have taken such an unusual step if there had not been good reason for it," he ventured to say, which was rather a hazardous speech; for the Major might have divined its actual meaning, and then things would have gone badly with Mr. Sorbette. But, as it happened, Major Ochterlony

was far too much occupied to pay attention to anybody's meaning except his own.

"Yes, there was good reason," he said. "She lost her marriage 'lines,' you know; and all our witnesses are dead. I thought she might perhaps find herself in a disagreeable position if anything happened to me."

As he spoke, the doctor regarded him with surprise so profound as to be half sublime — surprise and a perplexity and doubt wonderful to behold. Was this a story the Major had made up, or was it perhaps after all the certain truth? It was just what he had said at first; but the first time it was stated with more warmth, and did not produce the same effect. Mr. Sorbette respected Mrs. Ochterlony to the bottom of his heart; but still he had shaken his head, and said, "There was no accounting for those things." And now he did not know what to make of it: whether to believe in the innocence of the couple, or to think the Major had made up a story — which, to be sure, would be by much the greatest miracle of all.

"If that was the case, I think it would have been better to let well alone," said the doctor. "That is what I would have done had it been me."

"Then why did not you tell me so?" said Major Ochterlony. "I asked you before; and what you all said to me was, 'If that's the case, best to repeat it at once.' Good Lord! to think how little one can rely upon one's friends when one asks their advice. But in the meantime the question is about Mary. I wish you'd go and see her and give her something — a tonic, you know, or something strengthening. I think I'll step over and see Churchill, and get him to strike that unfortunate piece of nonsense out of the register.

As it was only a piece of form, I should think he would do it; and if it is *that* that ails her, it would do her good."

"If I were you, I'd let well alone," said the doctor; but he said it low, and he was putting on his hat as he spoke, and went off immediately to see his patient. Even if curiosity and surprise had not been in operation, he would still probably have hastened to Madonna Mary. For the regiment loved her in its heart, and the loss of her fair serene presence would have made a terrible gap at the station. "We must not let her be ill if we can help it," Mr. Sorbette said to himself; and then he made a private reflection about that ass Ochterlony and his fidgets. But yet, notwithstanding all his faults, the Major was not an ass. On thinking it over again, he decided not to go to Churchill with that little request about the register; and he felt more and more, the more he reflected upon it, how hard it was that in a moment of real emergency a man should be able to put so little dependence upon his friends. Even Mary had let him do it, though she had seen how dangerous and impolitic it was; and all the others had let him do it; for certainly it was not without asking advice that he had taken what the doctor called so unusual a step. Major Ochterlony felt as he took this into consideration that he was an injured man. What was the good of being on intimate terms with so many people if not one of them could give him the real counsel of a friend when he wanted it? And even Mary had let him do it! The thought of such a strange dereliction of duty on the part of everybody connected with him, went to the Major's heart.

As for Mary, it would be a little difficult to express her feelings. She got up as soon as her husband was gone, and threw off the light covering he had put over her so carefully, and went back to her work; for to lie still in a darkened room was not a remedy in which she put any faith. And to tell the truth, poor Mary's heart was eased a little, perhaps physically, by her tears, which had done her good, and by the other incidents of the evening, which had thrown down as it were the separation between her and her husband, and taken away the one rankling and aching wound she had. Now that he saw that he had done wrong — now that he was aware that it was a wrong step he had taken — a certain remnant of bitterness which had been lurking in a corner of Mary's heart came all to nothing and died down in a moment. As soon as he was himself awakened to it, Mary forgot her own wound and every evil thought she had ever had, in her sorrow for him. She remembered his look of dismay, his dead silence, his unusual exclamation; and she said, "poor Hugh!" in her heart, and was ready to condone his worst faults. *Otherwise*, as Mrs. Ochterlony said to herself, he had scarcely a fault that anybody could point out. He was the kindest, the most true and tender! Everybody acknowledged that he was the best husband in the regiment, and which of them could stand beside him, even in an inferior place? Not Colonel Kirkman, who might have been a petrified Colonel out of the Drift (if there were Colonels in those days), for any particular internal evidence to the contrary; nor Captain Hesketh, who was so well off; nor any half dozen of the other officers. This was the state of mind in which Mrs. Ochterlony was when the

doctor called. And he found her quite well, and thought her an unaccountable woman, and shrugged his shoulders, and wondered what the Major would take into his head next. "He said it was on the nerves, as the poor women call it," said the doctor, transferring his own suggestion to Major Ochterlony. "I should like to know what he means by making game of people — as if I had as much time to talk nonsense as he has: but I thought, to be sure, when he said that, that it was a cock-and-bull story. I ought to know something about your nerves."

"He was quite right," said Mrs. Ochterlony; and she smiled and took hold of the great trouble that was approaching her and made a buckler of it for her husband. "My nerves were very much upset. You know we have to make up our minds to send Hugh home."

And as she spoke she looked up at Mr. Sorbette with eyes brimming over with two great tears — real tears, Heaven knows, which came but too readily to back up her sacred plea. The doctor recoiled before them as if somebody had levelled a pistol at him; for he was a man that could not bear to see women crying, as he said, or to see anybody in distress, which was the true statement of the case.

"There — there," he said, "don't excite yourself. What is the good of thinking about it? Everybody has to do it, and the monkeys get on as well as possible. Look here, pack up all this work and trash, and amuse yourself. Why don't you go out more, and take a little relaxation? You had better send over to my sister for a novel; or if there's nothing else for it, get the baby. Don't sit working and driving yourself crazy here."

So that was all Mr. Sorbette could do in the case; and a wonderfully puzzled doctor he was as he went back to his quarters, and took the first opportunity of telling his sister that she was all wrong about the Ochterlonys, and he always knew she was. "As if a man could know anything about it," Miss Sorbette said. And in the meantime the Major went home, and was very tender of Mary, and petted and watched over her as if she had had a real illness. Though, after all, the question why she had let him do so, was often nearly on his lips, as it was always in his heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

What Mrs. Ochterlony had to do after this was to write to Aunt Agatha, settling everything about little Hugh, which was by no means an easy thing to do, especially since the matter had been complicated by that most unnecessary suggestion about Islay, which Mrs. Hesketh had thought proper to make; as if she, who had a grown-up daughter to be her companion, and swarms of children, so many as almost to pass the bounds of possible recollection, could know anything about how it felt to send off one's entire family, leaving only a baby behind; but then that is so often the way with those well-off people, who have never had anything happen to them. Mary had to write that if all was well, and they could find "an opportunity," probably Hugh would be sent by the next mail but one; for she succeeded in persuading herself and the Major that sooner than that it would be impossible to have his

things ready. "You do not say anything about Islay, my dear," said the Major, when he read the letter, "and you must see that for the child's sake —"

"Oh, Hugh, what difference can it make?" said Mrs. Ochterlony, with conscious sophistry. "If she can take one child, she can take two. It is not like a man—" But whether it was Islay or Aunt Agatha who was not like a man, Mary did not explain; and she went on with her preparations with a desperate trust in circumstances, such as women are often driven to. Something might happen to preserve to her yet for a little while longer her three-year-old boy. Hugh was past hoping for, but it seemed to her now that she would accept with gratitude, as a mitigated calamity, the separation from one which had seemed so terrible to her at first. As for the Major, he adhered to the idea with a tenacity unusual to him. He even came and superintended her at the work-table, and asked continually, How about Islay? if all these things were for Hugh? — which was a question that called forth all the power of sophistry and equivocation which Mrs. Ochterlony possessed to answer. But still she put a certain trust in circumstances that something might still happen to save Islay — and indeed something did happen, though far, very far, from being as Mary wished.

The Major in the meantime had done his best to shake himself free from the alarm and dismay indirectly produced in his mind by his brother's letter. He had gone to Mr. Churchill after all, but found it impracticable to get the entry blotted out of the register, notwithstanding his assurance that it was simply a matter of form. Mr. Churchill had no doubt on that point,

but he could not alter the record, though he condoled with the sufferer. "I cannot think how you all could let me do it," the Major said. "A man may be excused for taking the alarm, if he is persuaded that his wife will get into trouble when he is gone, for want of a formality; but how all of you, with cool heads and no excitement to take away your judgment —"

"Who persuaded you?" said the clergyman, with a little dismay.

"Well, you know Kirkman said things looked very bad in Scotland when the marriage lines were lost. How could I tell? he is Scotch, and he ought to know. And then to think of Mary in trouble, and perhaps losing her little provision if anything happened to me. It was enough to make a man do anything foolish; but how all of you who know better should have let me do it —"

"My dear Major," said Mr. Churchill mildly, "I don't think you are a man to be kept from doing anything when your heart is set upon it; — and then you were in such a hurry —"

"Ah, yes," said Major Ochterlony with a deep sigh; "and nobody, that I can remember, ever suggested to me to wait a little. That's what it is, Churchill; to have so many friends, and not one among them who would take the trouble to tell a man he was wrong."

"Major Ochterlony," said the clergyman, a little stiffly, "you forget that I said everything I could say to convince you. Of course I did not know all the circumstances — but I hope I shall always have courage enough, when I think so, to tell any man he is in the wrong."

"My dear fellow, I did not mean you," said the Major, with another sigh; and perhaps it was with a similar statement that the conversation always concluded when Major Ochterlony confided to any special individual of his daily associates, this general condemnation of his friends, of which he made as little a secret as he had made of his re-marriage. The station knew as well after that, that Major Ochterlony was greatly disturbed about the "unusual step" he had taken, and was afraid it might be bad for little Hugh's future prospects, as it had been aware beforehand of the wonderful event itself. And naturally there was a great deal of discussion on the subject. There were some people who contented themselves with thinking, like the doctor, that Ochterlony was an ass with his fidgets; while there were others who thought he was "deep," and was trying, as they said, to do away with the bad impression. The former class were men, and the latter were women; but it was by no means all the women who thought so. Not to speak of the younger class, like poor little Mrs. Askell, there were at least two of the most important voices at the station which did not declare themselves. Mrs. Kirkman shook her head, and hoped that however it turned out it might be for all their good, and above all might convince Mary of the error of her ways; and Mrs. Hesketh thought everybody made a great deal too much fuss about it, and begged the public in general to let the Ochterlonys alone. But the fact was, that so far as the ordinary members of society were concerned, the Major's new agitation revived the gossip that had nearly died out, and set it all afloat again. It had been dying away under the mingled influences of time, and the

non-action of the leading ladies, and Mrs. Ochterlony's serene demeanour, which forbade the idea of evil. But when it was thus started again the second time, it was less likely to be made an end of. Mary, however, was as unconscious of the renewed commotion as if she had been a thousand miles away. The bitterness had gone out of her heart, and she had half begun to think as the Major did, that he was an injured man, and that it was her fault and his friends' fault; and then she was occupied with something still more important, and could not go back to the old pain, from which she had suffered enough. Thus it was with her in those troubled, but yet, as she afterwards thought, happy days; when she was very miserable sometimes and very glad — when she had a great deal, as people said, to put up with, a great deal to forgive, and many a thing of which she did not herself approve, to excuse and justify to others; this was her condition, and she had at the same time before her the dreadful probability of separation from both of her children, the certainty of a separation, and a long, dangerous voyage for one of them, and sat and worked to this end day after day, with a sense of what at the moment seemed exquisite wretchedness. But yet, thinking over it afterwards, and looking back upon it, it seemed to Mary as if those were happy days.

The time was coming very near when Hugh (as Mrs. Ochterlony said), or the children (as the Major was accustomed to say) were going home; when all at once, without any preparation, very startling news came to the station. One of the little local rebellions that are always taking place in India had broken out somewhere, and a strong detachment of the regiment

was to be sent immediately to quell it. Major Ochterlony came home that day a little excited by the news, and still more by the certainty that it was he who must take the command. He was excited because he was a soldier at heart, and liked, kind man as he was, to see something doing; and because active service was more hopeful, and exhilarating, and profitable, than reposing at the station, where there was no danger, and very little to do. "I don't venture to hope that the rogues will show fight," he said cheerfully; "so there is no need to be anxious, Mary; and you can keep the boys with you till I come back — that is only fair," he said, in his exultation. As for Mary, the announcement took all the colour out of her cheeks, and drove both Hugh and Islay out of her mind. He had seen service enough, it is true, since they were married, to habituate her to that sort of thing; and she had made, on the whole, a very good soldier's wife, bearing her anxiety in silence, and keeping a brave front to the world. But perhaps Mr. Sorbette was right when he thought her nerves were upset. So many things all coming together may have been too much for her. When she heard of this she broke down altogether, and felt a cold thrill of terror go through her from her head to her heart, or from her heart to her head, which perhaps would be the most just expression; but she dared not say a word to her husband to deter or discourage him. When he saw the two tears that sprang into her eyes, and the sudden paleness that came over her face, he kissed her, all flushed and smiling as he was, and said: "Now, don't be silly, Mary. Don't forget you are a soldier's wife." There was not a touch of despondency or foreboding about

him; and what could she say who knew, had there been ever so much foreboding, that his duty was the thing to be thought of, and not anybody's feelings? Her cheek did not regain its colour all that day, but she kept it to herself, and forgot even about little Hugh's reprieve. The children were dear, but their father was dearer, or at least so it seemed at that moment. Perhaps if the lives of the little ones had been threatened, the Major's expedition might have bulked smaller — for the heart can hold only one overwhelming emotion at a time. But the affair was urgent, and Mary did not have very much time left to her to think of it. Almost before she had realized what it was, the drums had beat, and the brisk music of the band — that music that people called exhilarating — had roused all the station, and the measured march of the men had sounded past, as if they were all treading upon her heart. The Major kissed his little boys in their beds, for it was, to be sure, unnaturally early, as everything is in India; and he had made his wife promise to go and lie down, and take care of herself, when he was gone. "Have the baby, and don't think any more of me than you can help, and take care of my boys. We shall be back sooner than you want us," the Major had said, as he took tender leave of his "bonnie Mary." And for her part, she stood as long as she could see them, with her two white lips pressed tight together, waving her hand to her soldier till he was gone out of sight. And then she obeyed him, and lay down and covered her head, and sobbed to herself in the growing light, as the big blazing sun began to touch the horizon. She was sick with pain and terror, and she could not tell why. She had

watched him go away before, and had hailed him coming back again, and had known him in hotter conflict than this could be, and wounded, and yet he had taken no great harm. But all that did her little good now; perhaps because her nerves were weaker than usual, from the repeated shocks she had had to bear.

And it was to be expected that Mrs. Kirkman would come to see her, to console her that morning, and put the worst thoughts into her head. But before even Mrs. Kirkman, little Emma Askell came rushing in, with her baby and a bundle, and threw herself at Mary's feet. The Ensign had gone to the wars, and it was the first experience of such a kind that had fallen to the lot of his little baby-wife; and naturally her anxiety told more distinctly upon her than it did upon Mary's ripe soul and frame. The poor little thing was white and cold and shivering, notwithstanding the blazing Indian day that began to lift itself over their heads. She fell down at Mary's feet, forgetting all about the beetles and scorpions which were the horror of her ordinary existence, and clasped her knees, and held Mrs. Ochterlony fast, grasping the bundle and the little waxen baby at the same time in the other arm.

"Do you think they will ever come back?" said poor little Emma. "Oh, Mrs. Ochterlony, tell me. I can bear it if you will tell me the worst. If anything were to happen to Charlie, and me not with him! I never, never, never can live until the news comes. Oh, tell me, do you think they will ever come back?"

"If I did not think they would come back, do you think I could take it so quietly?" said Mary, and she

smiled as best she could, and lifted up the poor little girl, and took from her the baby and the bundle, which seemed all one, so closely were they held. Mrs. Ochterlony had deep eyes, which did not show when she had been crying; and she was not young enough to cry in thunder showers, as Emma Askell at eighteen might still be permitted to do; and the very sight of her soothed the young creature's heart. "You know you are a soldier's wife," Mary said; "I think I was as bad as you are the first time the Major left me — but we all get used to it after a few years."

"And he came back?" said Emma, doing all she could to choke a sob.

"He must have come back, or I should not have parted with him this morning," said Mrs. Ochterlony, who had need of all her own strength just at that moment. "Let us see in the meantime what this bundle is, and why you have brought poor baby out in her night-gown. And what a jewel she is to sleep! When my little Willy gets disturbed," said Mary, with a sigh, "he gives none of us any rest. I will make up a bed for her here on the sofa; and now tell me what this bundle is for, and why you have rushed out half dressed. We'll talk about *them* presently. Tell me first about yourself."

Upon which Emma hung down her pretty little head, and began to fold a hem upon her damp handkerchief, and did not know how to explain herself. "Don't be angry with me," she said. "Oh, my Madonna, let me come and stay with you! — that was what I meant; I can't stay there by myself — and I will nurse Willy, and do your hair and help sewing. I don't mind what I do. Oh, Mrs. Ochterlony, don't

send me away! I should die if I were alone. And as for baby, she never troubles anybody. She is so good. I will be your little servant, and wait upon you like a slave, if you will only let me stay."

It would be vain to say that Mrs. Ochterlony was pleased by this appeal, for she was herself in a very critical state of mind, full of fears that she could give no reason for, and a hundred fantastic pains which she would fain have hidden from human sight. She had been taking a little comfort in the thought of the solitude, the freedom from visitors and disturbance, that she might safely reckon on, and in which she thought her mind might perhaps recover a little; and this young creature's society was not specially agreeable to her. But she was touched by the looks of the forlorn girl, and could no more have sent her away than she could repress the little movement of impatience and half disgust that rose in her heart. She was not capable of giving her any effusive welcome; but she kissed poor little Emma, and put the bundle beside the baby on the sofa, and accepted her visitor without saying anything about it. Perhaps it did her no harm: though she felt by moments as if her impatient longing to be alone and silent, and free to think her own thoughts, would break out in spite of all her self-control. But little Mrs. Askell never suspected the existence of any such emotions. She thought, on the contrary, that it was because Mary was used to it that she took it so quietly, and wondered whether *she* would ever get used to it. Perhaps, on the whole, Emma hoped not. She thought to herself that Mrs. Ochterlony, who was so little disturbed by the parting, would not feel the joy of the return half

so much as she should; and on these terms she preferred to take the despair along with the joy. But under the shadow of Mary's matronly presence the little thing cheered up, and got back her courage. After she had been comforted with tea, and had fully realized her position as Mrs. Ochterlony's visitor, Emma's spirits rose. She was half or quarter Irish, as has been already mentioned, and behaved herself accordingly. She recollected her despair, it is true, in the midst of a game with Hugh and Islay, and cried a little, but soon comforted herself with the thought that at that moment her Charlie could be in no danger. "They'll be stopping somewhere for breakfast by a well, and camping all about, and they can't get any harm there," said Emma; and thus she kept chattering all day. If she had chattered only, and been content with chattering, it would have been comparatively easy work; but then she was one of those people who require answers, and will be spoken to. And Mary had to listen and reply, and give her opinion where they would be now, and when, at the very earliest, they might be expected back. With such a discipline to undergo, it may be thought a supererogation to bring Mrs. Kirkman in upon her that same morning with her handkerchief in her hand, prepared, if it were necessary, to weep with Mary. But still it is the case that Mrs. Kirkman did come, as might have been expected; and to pass over conversation so edifying as hers, would, under such circumstances, be almost a crime.

"My dear Mary," Mrs. Kirkman said when she came in, "I am so glad to see you up and making an effort; it is so much better than giving way. We must accept these trials as something sent us for our good.

I am sure the Major has all our prayers for his safe return. Oh, Mary, do you not remember what I said to you — that God, I was sure, was not going to let you alone?"

"I never thought He would leave me alone," said Mrs. Ochterlony; but certainly, though it was a right enough sentiment, it was not uttered in a right tone of voice.

"He will not rest till you see your duty more clearly," said her visitor; "if it were not for that, why should He have sent you so many things one after another? It is far better and more blessed than if He had made you happy and comfortable as the carnal heart desires. But I did not see you had any one with you," said Mrs. Kirkman, stopping short at the sight of Emma, who had just come into the room.

"Poor child, she was frightened and unhappy, and came to me this morning," said Mary. "She will stay with me — till — they come home."

"Let us say *if* they come home," said Mrs. Kirkman, solemnly. "I never like to be too certain. We know when they go forth, but who can tell when they will come back. That is in God's hands."

At this speech Emma fell trembling and shivering again, and begged Mrs. Kirkman to tell her the worst, and cried out that she could bear it. She thought of nothing but her Charlie, as was natural, and that the Colonel's wife had already heard some bad news. And Mrs. Kirkman thought of nothing but improving the occasion; and both of them were equally indifferent, and indeed unaware of the cold shudder which went through Mary, and the awful foreboding that closed down upon her, putting out the sunshine. It was a

little safeguard to her to support the shivering girl who already half believed herself a widow, and to take up the challenge of the spiritual teacher who felt herself responsible for their souls.

"Do not make Emma think something is wrong," she said. "It is so easy to make a young creature wretched with a word. If the Colonel had been with them, it might have been different. But it is easy just now for you to frighten us. I am sure you do not mean it." And then Mary had to whisper in the young wife's ear, "She knows nothing about them — it is only her way," which was a thing very easily said to Emma, but very difficult to establish herself upon in her own heart.

And then Mrs. Hesketh came in to join the party.

"So they are gone," the new comer said. "What a way little Emma is in, to be sure. Is it the first time he has ever left you, my dear? and I daresay they have been saying something dreadful to frighten you. It is a great shame to let girls marry so young. I have been reckoning," said the easy-minded woman, whose husband was also of the party, "how long they are likely to be. If they get to Amberabad, say to-morrow, and if there is nothing very serious, and all goes well, you know, they might be back here on Saturday — and we had an engagement for Saturday," Mrs. Hesketh said. Her voice was quite easy and pleasant, as it always was; but nevertheless, Mary knew that if she had not felt excited, she would not have paid such an early morning visit, and that even her confident calculation about the return proved she was in a little anxiety about it. The fact was, that none of them were quite at their ease, except Mrs.

Kirkman, who, having no personal interest in the matter, was quite equal to taking a very gloomy view of affairs.

"How can any one think of such vanities at such a moment?" Mrs. Kirkman said. "Oh, if I only could convince you, my dear friends. None of us can tell what sort of engagement they may have before next Saturday — perhaps the most solemn engagement ever given to man. Don't let misfortune find you in this unprepared state of mind. There is nothing on earth so solemn as seeing soldiers go away. You may think of the band and all that, but for me, I always seem to hear a voice saying, 'Prepare to meet your God.'"

To be sure the Colonel was in command of the station and was safe at home, and his wife could speculate calmly upon the probable fate of the detachment. But as for the three women who were listening to her, it was not so easy for them. There was a dreadful pause, for nobody could contradict such a speech; and poor little Emma dropped down sobbing on the floor; and the colour forsook even Mrs. Hesketh's comely cheek; and as for Mary, though she could not well be paler, her heart seemed to contract and shrink within her; and none of them had the courage to say anything. Naturally Mrs. Hesketh, with whom it was a principle not to fret, was the first to recover her voice.

"After all, though it's always an anxious time, I don't see any particular reason we have to be uneasy," she said. "Hesketh told me he felt sure they would give in at once. It may be very true all you say, but at the same time we may be reasonable, you know, and not take fright when there is no cause for

it. Don't cry, Emma, you little goose; you'll have him back again in two or three days, all right."

And after awhile the anxious little assembly broke up, and Mrs. Hesketh, who though she was very liberal in her way, was not much given to personal charities, went to see some of the soldiers' wives, who, poor souls, would have been just as anxious if they had had the time for it, and gave them the best advice about their children, and promised tea and sugar if they would come to fetch it, and old frocks, in which she was always rich; and these women were so ungrateful as to like her visit better than that of the Colonel's wife, who carried them always on her heart and did them a great deal of good, and never confined herself to kindnesses of impulse. And little Emma Askell cried herself to sleep sitting on the floor, notwithstanding the beetles, reposing her pretty face flushed with weeping and her swollen eyes upon the sofa, where Mary sat and watched over her. Mrs. Hesketh got a little ease out of her visit to the soldiers' wives, and Emma forgot her troubles in sleep; but no sort of relief came to Mary, who reasoned with hersel all day long without being able to deliver herself from the pressure of the deadly cold hand that seemed to have been laid upon her heart.

CHAPTER IX.

And Mary's forebodings came true. Though it was so unlikely, and indeed seemed so unreasonable to everybody who knew about such expeditions, instead of bringing back his men victorious, it was the men, all drooping and discouraged, who carried back the brave and tender Major, covered over with the flag he had died for. The whole station was overcast with mourning when that melancholy procession came back. Mr. Churchill, who met them coming in, hurried back with his heart swelling up into his throat to prepare Mrs. Ochterlony for what was coming; but Mary was the only creature at the station who did not need to be prepared. She knew it was going to be so when she saw him go away. She felt in her heart that this was to be the end of it from the moment when he first told her of the expedition on which he was ordered. And when she saw poor Mr. Churchill's face, from which he had vainly tried to banish the traces of the horrible shock he had just received, she saw that the blow had fallen. She came up to him and took hold of his hands, and said, "I know what it is;" and almost felt, in the strange and terrible excitement of the moment, as if she were sorry for him who felt it so much.

This was how it was, and all the station was struck with mourning. A chance bullet, which most likely had been fired without any purpose at all, had done its appointed office in Major Ochterlony's brave, tender,

honest bosom. Though he had been foolish enough by times, nobody now thought of that to his disadvantage. Rather, if anything, it surrounded him with a more affectionate regret. A dozen wise men might have perished and not left such a gap behind them as the Major did, who had been good to everybody in his restless way, and given a great deal of trouble, and made up for it, as only a man with a good heart and natural gift of friendliness could do. He had worried his men many a time as the Colonel never did, for example: but then, to Major Ochterlony they were men and fine fellows, while they were only machines, like himself, to Colonel Kirkman; and more than one critic in regimentals was known to say with a sigh, "If it had only been the Colonel." But it was only the fated man who had been so over-careful about his wife's fate in case anything happened to him. Young Askell came by stealth like a robber to take his little wife out of the house where Mary was not capable any longer of her society; and Captain Hesketh too had come back all safe — all of them except the one: and the women in their minds stood round Mary in a kind of hushed circle, looking with an awful fellow-feeling and almost self-reproach at the widowhood which might have, but had not, fallen upon themselves. It was no fault of theirs that she had to bear the cross for all of them as it were; and yet their hearts ached over her, as if somehow they had purchased their own exemption at her expense. When the first dark moment, during which nobody saw Madonna Mary — a sweet title which had come back to all their lips in the hour of trouble — was over, they took turns to be with her, those grieved and compunctious women — compunctious

not so much because at one time in thought they had done her wrong, as because now they were happy and she was sorrowful. And thus passed over a time that cannot be described in a book, or at least in such a book as this. Mary had to separate herself, with still the bloom of her life unimpaired, from all the fair company of matrons round her; to put the widow's veil over the golden reflections in her hair, and the faint colour that came faintly back to her cheek by imprescriptible right of her health and comparative youth, and to go away out of the high-road of life where she had been wayfaring in trouble and in happiness, to one of those humble by-ways where the feeble and broken take shelter. Heaven knows she did not think of that. All that she thought of was her dead soldier who had gone away in the bloom of *his* days to the unknown darkness which God alone knows the secrets of, who had left all his comrades uninjured and at peace behind him, and had himself been the only one to answer for that enterprize with his life. It is strange to see this wonderful selection going on in the world, even when one has no immediate part in it; but stranger, far stranger, to wake up from one's musings and feel all at once that it is one's self whom God has laid his hand upon for this stern purpose. The wounded creature may writhe upon the sword, but it is of no use; and again as ever, those who are not wounded — those perhaps for whose instruction the spectacle is made — draw round in a hushed circle and look on. Mary Ochterlony was a dutiful woman, obedient and submissive to God's will; and she gave no occasion to that circle of spectators to break up the hush and awe of natural sympathy and

criticise her how she bore it. But after a while she came to perceive, what everybody comes to perceive who has been in such a position, that the sympathy had changed its character. That was natural too. How a man bears death and suffering of body, has long been one of the favourite objects of primitive human curiosity; and to see how anguish and sorrow affect the mind is a study as exciting and still more interesting. It was this that roused Mrs. Ochterlony out of her first stupor, and made her decide so soon as she did upon her journey home.

All these events had passed in so short a time, that there were many people who on waking up in the morning, and recollecting that Mary and her children were going next day, could scarcely realize that the fact was possible, or that it could be true about the Major, who had so fully intended sending his little boys home by that same mail. But it is, on the whole, astonishing how soon and how calmly a death is accepted by the general community; and even the people who asked themselves could this change really have happened in so short a time, took pains an hour or two after to make up little parcels for friends at home, which Mary was to carry; bits of Oriental embroidery and filagree ornaments, and little portraits of the children, and other trifles that were not important enough to warrant an Overland parcel, or big enough to go by the Cape. Mary was very kind in that way, they all said. She accepted all kinds of commissions, perhaps without knowing very well what she was doing, and promised to go and see people whom she had no likelihood of ever going to see; the truth was, that she heard and saw and understood only partially, sometimes rousing up for a moment and catching one word

or one little incident with the intensest distinctness, and then relapsing back again into herself. She did not quite make out what Emma Askell was saying the last time her little friend came to see her. Mary was packing her boys' things at the moment, and much occupied with a host of cares, and what she heard was only a stream of talk, broken with the occasional burden which came in like a chorus "when you see mamma."

"When I see mamma?" said Mary, with a little surprise.

"Dear Mrs. Ochterlony, you said you would perhaps go to see her — in St. John's Wood," said Emma, with tears of vexation in her eyes; "you know I told you all about it. The Laburnums, Acacia-road. And she will be so glad to see you. I explained it all, and you said you would go. I told her how kind you had been to me, and how you let me stay with you when I was so anxious about Charlie. Oh, dear Mrs. Ochterlony, forgive me! I did not mean to bring it back to your mind."

"No," said Mary, with a kind of forlorn amusement. It seemed so strange, almost droll, that they should think any of their poor little passing words would bring that back to her which was never once out of her mind, nor other than the centre of all her thoughts. "I must have been dreaming when I said so, Emma; but if I have promised, I will try to go — I have nothing to do in London, you know — I am going to the North-country, among my own people," which was an easier form of expression than to say, as they all did, that she was going home.

"But everybody goes to London," insisted Emma; and it was only when Mr. Churchill came in, also with

a little packet, that the ensign's wife was silenced. Mr. Churchill's parcel was for his mother who lived in Yorkshire, naturally, as Mrs. Ochterlony was going to the North, quite in her way. But the clergyman, for his part, had something more important to say. When Mrs. Askell was gone, he stopped Mary in her packing to speak to her seriously as he said, "You will forgive me and feel for me, I know," he said. "It is about your second marriage, Mrs. Ochterlony."

"Don't speak of it — oh, don't speak of it," Mary said, with an imploring tone that went to his heart.

"But I ought to speak of it — if you can bear it," said Mr. Churchill, "and I know for the boys' sake that you can bear everything. I have brought an extract from the register, if you would like to have it; and I have added below——"

"Mr. Churchill, you are very kind, but I don't want ever to think of that," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "I don't want to recollect now that such a thing ever took place — I wish all record of it would disappear from the face of the earth. Afterwards he thought the same," she said, hurriedly. Meanwhile Mr. Churchill stood with the paper half drawn from his pocket-book, watching the changes of her face.

"It shall be as you like," he said, slowly, "but only as I have written below —— If you change your mind, you have only to write to me, my dear Mrs. Ochterlony — if I stay here — and I am sure I don't know if I shall stay here; but in case I don't, you can always learn where I am, from my mother at that address."

"Do you think you will not stay here?" said Mary,

whose heart was not so much absorbed in her own sorrows that she could not feel for the dismayed, desponding mind that made itself apparent in the poor clergyman's voice.

"I don't know," he said, in the dreary tones of a man who has little choice, "with our large family, and my wife's poor health. I shall miss you dreadfully — both of you: you can't think how cheery and hearty he always was — and that to a down-hearted man like me ——"

And then Mary sat down and cried. It went to her heart and dispersed all her heaviness and stupor, and opened the great sealed fountains. And Mr. Churchill once more felt the climbing sorrow in his throat, and said in broken words, "Don't cry — God will take care of you. He knows why He has done it, though we don't; and He has given his own word to be a father to the boys."

That was all the poor priest could find it in his heart to say — but it was better than a sermon — and he went away with the extract from the register still in his pocket-book and tears in his eyes; while for her part Mary finished her packing with a heart relieved by her tears. Ah, how cheery and hearty he had been, how kind to the down-hearted man; how different the stagnant quietness now from that cheerful commotion he used to make, and all the restless life about him; and then his favourite words seemed to come up about and surround her, flitting in the air with a sensation between acute torture and a dull happiness. His bonnie Mary! It was not any vanity on Mary's part that made her think above all of that name. Thus she did her packing and got ready for her voy-

age, and took the good people's commissions without knowing very well to what it was that she pledged herself; and it was the same mail — "the mail after next" — by which she had written to Aunt Agatha that Hugh was to be sent home.

They would all have come to see her off if they could have ventured to do it that last morning: but the men prevented it, who are good for something now and then in such cases. As it was, however, Mrs. Kirkman and Mrs. Hesketh and Emma Askell were there, and poor sick Mrs. Churchill, who had stolen from her bed in her dressing-gown to kiss Mary for the last time.

"Oh, my dear, if it had been me — oh, if it had only been me! — and you would all have been so good to the poor children," sobbed the poor clergyman's ailing wife. Yet it was not her, but the strong, brave, cheery Major, the prop and pillar of a house. As for Mrs. Kirkman, there never was a better proof that she was, as we have so often said, in spite of her talk, a good woman, than the fact that she could only cry helplessly over Mary, and had not a word to say. She had thought and prayed that God would not leave her friend alone, but she had not meant Him to go so far as this; and her heart ached and fluttered at the terrible notion that perhaps *she* had something to do with the striking of this blow. Mrs. Hesketh for her part packed every sort of dainties for the children in a basket, and strapped on a bundle of portable toys to amuse them on the journey, to one of Mrs. Ochterlony's boxes. "You will be glad of them before you get there," said the experienced woman, who had once made the journey with half-a-dozen, as she said, and

knew what it was. And then one or two of the men were walking about outside in an accidental sort of way, to have a last look of Mary. It was considered a very great thing among them all when the doctor, who hated to see people in trouble, and disapproved of crying on principle, made up his mind to go in and shake hands with Mrs. Ochterlony; but it was not *that* he went for, but to look at the baby, and give Mary a little case "with some sal volatile and so forth, and the quantities marked," he said, "not that you are one to want sal volatile. The little shaver there will be all right as soon as you get to England. Good-bye. Take care of yourself." And he wrung her hand and bolted out again like a flash of lightning. He said afterwards that the only sensible thing he knew of his sister, was that she did not go; and that the sight of all those women crying was enough to give a man a sunstroke, not to speak of the servants and the soldiers' wives who were howling at the back of the house.

Oh, what a change it was in so short a time, to go out of the Indian home, which had been a true home, with Mr. Churchill to take care of her and her poor babies, and set her face to the cold far-away world of her youth which she had forgotten, and which everybody called home by a kind of mockery; and where was Hugh, who had always taken such care of his own? Mary did not cry as people call crying, but now and then, two great big hot tears rolled out of the bitter fountain that was full to overflowing, and fell scalding on her hands, and gave her a momentary sense of physical relief. Almost all the ladies of the station were ill after it all the day; but Mary could not afford to be ill; and Mr. Churchill was very kind, and went

with her through all the first part of her journey over the cross roads, until she had come into the trunk road, where there was no more difficulty. He was very, very kind, and she was very grateful; but yet perhaps when you have had some one of your very own to do everything for you, who was not kind but did it by nature, it is better to take to doing it yourself *after*, than have even the best of friends to do it for kindness' sake. This was what Mary felt when the good man had gone sadly back to his sick wife and his uncertain lot. It was a kind of relief to her to be all alone, entirely alone with her children, for the ayah, to be sure, did not count — and to have everything to do; and this was how they came down mournfully to the sea-board, and to the big town which filled Hugh and Islay with childish excitement, and Mary bade an everlasting farewell to her life, to all that she had actually known as life — and got to sea, to go, as they said, home.

It would be quite useless for our purpose to go over the details of the voyage, which was like other voyages, bad and good by turns. When she was at sea, Mrs. Ochterlony had a little leisure, and felt ill and weak and overworn, and was the better for it after. It took her mind for the moment off that unmeasured contemplation of her sorrow which is the soul of grief, and her spirit got a little strength in the interval of repose. She had been twelve years in India, and from eighteen to thirty is a wonderful leap in a life. She did not know how she was to find the things and the people of whom she had a girl's innocent recollection; nor how they, who had not changed, would appear to her changed eyes. Her own people were very kind,

like everybody. Mary found a letter at Gibraltar from her brother-in-law, Francis, full of sympathy and friendly offers. He asked her to come to Earlston with her boys to see if they could not get on together. "Perhaps it might not do, but it would be worth a trial," Mr. Ochterlony sensibly said; and there was even a chance that Aunt Agatha, who was to have met with Hugh at Southampton, would come to meet her widowed niece, who might be supposed to stand still more in need of her good offices. Though indeed this was rather an addition to Mary's cares; for she thought the moment of landing would be bitter enough of itself, without the pain of meeting with some one who belonged to her, and yet did not belong to her, and who had doubtless grown as much out of the Aunt Agatha of old as she had grown out of the little Mary. When Mrs. Ochterlony left the North-country, Aunt Agatha had been a middle-aged maiden lady, still pretty, though a little faded, with light hair growing grey, which makes a woman's countenance, already on the decline, more faded still, and does not bring out the tints as dark hair in the same powdery condition sometimes does. And at that time she was still occupied by a thought of possibilities which people who knew Agatha Seton from the time she was sixteen, had decided at that early period to be impossible. No doubt twelve years had changed this — and it must have made a still greater change upon the little sister whom Mary had known only at six years old, and who was now eighteen, the age she had herself been when she married; a grown-up young woman, and of a character more decided than Mary's had ever been.

A little stir of reviving life awoke in her and

moved her, when the weary journey was over, and the steam-boat at length had reached Southampton, to go up to the deck and look from beneath the heavy penthouse of her widow's veil at the strangers who were coming — to see, as she said to herself, with a throb at her heart, if there was anybody she knew. Aunt Agatha was not rich, and it was a long journey, and perhaps she had not come. Mary stood on the crowded deck, a little apart, with Hugh and Islay on each side of her, and the baby in his nurse's arms — a group such as is often seen on these decks — all clad with loss and mourning, coming "home" to a country in which perhaps they have no longer any home. Nobody came to claim Mrs. Ochterlony as she stood among her little children. She thought she would have been glad of that, but when it came to the moment — when she saw the cold unknown shore and the strange country, and not a Christian soul to say welcome, poor Mary's heart sank. She sat down, for her strength was failing her, and drew Hugh and Islay close to her, to keep her from breaking down altogether. And it was just at that moment that the brightest of young faces peered down under her veil and looked doubtfully, anxiously at her, and called out impatiently, "Aunt Agatha!" to some one at the other side, without speaking to Mary. Mrs. Ochterlony did not hear this newcomer's equally impatient demand: "Is it Mary? Are those the children?" for she had dropped her sick head upon a soft old breast, and had an old fresh sweet faded face bent down upon her, lovely with love and age, and a pure heart. "Cry, my dear love, cry, it will do you good," was all that Aunt Agatha said. And she cried, too, with good will, and yet did not know whether it

was for sorrow or joy. This was how Mary, coming back to a fashion of existence which she knew not, was taken home.

CHAPTER X.

Aunt Agatha had grown into a sweet old lady: not so old, perhaps, but that she might have made up still into that elderly aspirant after youth, for whose special use the name "old maid" must have been invented, and yet there is a sweetness in the name, and it was not inapplicable to the fair old woman, who received Mary Ochterlony into her kind arms. There was a sort of tender misty consciousness upon her age, just as there is a tender unconsciousness in youth, of so many things that cannot but come to the knowledge of people who have eaten of the tree in the middle of the garden. She was surrounded by the unknown as was seemly to such a maiden soul. And yet she was old, and gleams of experience, and dim knowledge at second hand, had come to her from those misty tracts. Though she had not, and never could have, half the vigour or force in her which Mary had even in her subdued and broken state, still she had strength of affection and goodness enough to take the management of all affairs into her hands for the moment, and to set herself at the head of the little party. She took Mary and the chidren from the ship, and brought them to the inn at which she had stayed the night before; and, what was a still greater achievement, she repressed Winnie, and kept her in a semi-subordinate and silent

state — which was an effort which taxed all Aunt Agatha's powers. Though it may seem strange to say it, Mary and her young sister did not, as people say, take to each other at that first meeting. It was twelve years since they had met, and the eighteen-year-old young woman, accustomed to be a sovereign among her own people, and have all her whims attended to, did not, somehow, commend herself to Mary, who was broken, and joyless, and feeble, and little capable of glitter and motion. Aunt Agatha took the traveller to a cool room, where comparative quiet was to be had, and took off her heavy bonnet and cloak, and made her lie down, and came and sat by her. The children were in the next room, where the sound of their voices could reach their mother to keep her heart; and then Aunt Agatha took Mary's hand in both of hers, and said, "Tell me about it, my dear love." It was a way she had of speaking, but yet such words are sweet; especially to a forlorn creature who has supposed that there is nobody left in the world to address her so. And then Mary told her sad story with all the details that women love, and cried till the fountain of tears was for the time exhausted, and grief itself by its very vehemence had got calm; which was, as Aunt Agatha knew by instinct, the best way to receive a poor woman who was a widow, and had just set her solitary feet for the first time upon the shores which she left as a bride.

And so they rested and slept that first night on English soil. There are moments when sorrow feels sacramental, and as if it never could be disturbed again by the pettier emotions of life. Mrs. Ochterlony had gone to sleep in this calm, and it was with something

of the same feeling that she awoke. As if life, as she thought, being over, its cares were in some sense over too, and that now nothing could move her further; unless, indeed, it might be any harm to the children, which, thank God, there was no appearance of. In this state of mind she rose up and said her prayers, mingling them with some of those great tears which gather one by one as the heart fills, and which seem to give a certain physical relief when they brim over; and then she went to join her aunt and sister at breakfast, where they had not expected to see her. "My love, I would have brought you your tea," said Aunt Agatha, with a certain reproach; and when Mary smiled and said there was no need, even Winnie's heart was touched, — wilful Winnie in her black muslin gown, who was a little piqued to feel herself in the company of one more interesting than even she was, and hated herself for it, and yet could not help feeling as if Mary had come in like the prodigal, to be feasted and tended, while they never even killed a kid for her who had always been at home.

Winnie was eighteen, and she was not like her sister. She was tall, but not like Mary's tallness — a long slight slip of a girl, still full of corners. She had corners at her elbows, and almost at her shoulders, and a great many corners in her mind. She was not so much a pretty girl as a girl who would, or might be, a beautiful woman. Her eyebrows were arched, and so were her delicate nostrils, and her upper lip — all curved and moveable, and ready to quiver and speak when it was needful. When you saw her face in profile, that outline seemed to cut itself out, as in some warm marble against the back-ground.

It was not the *beauté du diable*, the bewildering charm of youth, and freshness, and smiles, and rose tints. She had something of all this, and to boot she had features — *beaux traits*. But as for this part of her power, Winnie, to do her justice, thought nothing of it; perhaps, to have understood that people minded what she said, and noticed what she did because she was very handsome, would have conveyed something like an insult and affront to the young lady. She did not care much, nor mind much at the present moment, whether she was pretty or not. She had no rivals, and beauty was a weapon the importance of which had not occurred to her. But she did care a good deal for being Winifred Seton, and as such, mistress of all she surveyed; and though she could have beaten herself for it, it galled her involuntarily to find herself thus all at once in the presence of a person whom Providence seemed to have set, somehow, in a higher position, and who was more interesting than herself. It was a wicked thought, and she did it battle. If it had been left to her, how she could have petted and cared for Mary, how she would have borne her triumphantly over all the fatigues of the journey, and thought nothing to take the tickets, and mind the luggage, and struggle with the railway porters for Mary's sake! But to have Mary come in and absorb Aunt Agatha's and everybody's first look, their first appeal and principal regard, was trying to Winnie; and she had never learned yet to banish altogether from her eyes what she thought.

"It does not matter, aunt," said Mary; "I cannot make a recluse of myself — I must go among strangers — and it is well to be able to practise a little with Winnie and you."

"You must not mind Winnie and me, my darling," said Aunt Agatha, who had a way of missing the arrow, as it were, and catching some of the feathers of it as it flew past.

"What do you mean about going among strangers?" said the keener Winnie. "I hope you don't think we are strangers; and there is no need for you to go into society that I can see — not now at least; or at all events not unless you like," she continued with a suspicion of sharpness in her tone, not displeased, perhaps, on the whole that Mary was turning out delusive and was thinking already of society — for which notwithstanding she scorned her sister, as was natural to a young woman at the experienced age of eighteen.

"Society is not what I was thinking of," said Mary, who in her turn did not like her young sister's criticism; and she took her seat and her cup of tea with an uncomfortable sense of opposition. She had thought that she could not be annoyed any more by petty matters, and was incapable of feeling the little cares and complications of life, and yet it was astonishing how Winnie's little, sharp, half-sarcastic tone brought back the faculty of being annoyed.

"The little we have at Kirtell will be a comfort to you, my love," said the soothing voice of Aunt Agatha; "all old friends. The vicar you know, Mary, and the doctor, and poor Sir Edward. There are some new people, but I do not make much account of them; and our little visiting would harm nobody," the old lady said, though with a slight tone of apology, not quite satisfied in herself that the widow should be even able to think of society so soon.

Upon which a little pucker of vexation came to

Mary's brow. As if she cared or could care for their little visiting, and the vicar, and the doctor, and Sir Edward! she to whom going among strangers meant something so real and so hard to bear.

"Dear Aunt Agatha," she said, "I am afraid you will not be pleased; but I have not been looking forward to anything so pleasant as going to Kirtell. The first thing I have to think of is the boys and their interests. And Francis Ochterlony has asked us to go to Earlston." These words came all confused from Mary's lips. She broke down, seeing what was coming; for this was something that she never had calculated on, or thought of having to bear.

A dead pause ensued, Aunt Agatha started and flushed all over, and gave an agitated exclamation, and then a sudden blank came upon her sweet old face. Mary did not look at her, but she saw without looking how her aunt stiffened into resentment, and offence, and mortification. She changed in an instant, as if Mrs. Ochterlony's confused statement had been a spell and drew herself up and sat motionless, a picture of surprised affection and wounded pride. Poor Mary saw it, and was grieved to the heart, and yet could not but resent such a want of understanding of her position and sympathy for herself. She lifted her cup to her lips with a trembling hand, and her tea did not refresh her. And it was the only near relative she had in the world, the tenderest-hearted creature in existence, a woman who could be cruel to nobody, who thus shut up her heart against her. Thus the three women sat together round their breakfast-table, and helped each other, and said nothing for one stern moment, which was a cruel moment for two of them at least.

"Earlston!" said Aunt Agatha at last, with a quiver in her voice. "Indeed it never occurred to me — I had not supposed that Francis Ochterlony had been so much to —— But never mind; if that is what you think best for yourself, Mary ——"

"There is nothing best for myself," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with the sharpness of despair. "I think it is my duty — and — and Hugh, I know, would have thought so. Our boy is his uncle's heir. They are the — the only Ochterlonys left now. It is what I must — what I ought to do."

And then there was another pause. Aunt Agatha for her part would have liked to cry, but then she had her side of the family to maintain, and though every pulse in her was beating with disappointment and mortified affection, she was not going to show that. "You must know best," she said, taking up her little air of dignity; "I am sure you must know best; I would never try to force my way of thinking on you, Mary. No doubt you have been more in the world than I have; but I did think when a woman was in trouble that to go among her own friends ——"

"Yes," said Mary, who was overwhelmed, and did not feel able to bear it, "but her friends might understand her and have a little pity for her, aunt, when she had hard things to do that wrung her heart ——"

"My dear," said Aunt Agatha, with, on her side, the bitterness of unappreciated exertion, "if you will think how far I have come, and what an unusual journey I have made, I think you will perceive that to accuse me of want of pity ——"

"Don't worry her, Aunt Agatha," said Winnie,

"she is not accusing you of want of pity. I think it a very strange sort of thing, myself; but let Mary have justice, that was not what she meant."

"I should like to know what she did mean," said Aunt Agatha, who was trembling with vexation, and with those tears which she wanted so much to shed; and then two or three of them dropped on the broad-brimmed cambric cuff which she was wearing solely on Mary's account. For, to be sure, Major Ochterlony was not to say a relation of hers that she should have worn such deep mourning for him. "I am sure I don't want to interfere, if she prefers Francis Ochterlony to her own friends," she added, with tremulous haste. She was the very same Aunt Agatha who had taken Mary to her arms the day before, and sat by her bed, listening to all the sad story of her widowhood. She had wept for Hugh, and she would have shared her cottage and her garden and all she had with Mary, with good will and bounty, eagerly — but Francis Ochterlony was a different matter; and it was not in human nature to bear the preference of a husband's brother to "her own friends." "They may be the last Ochterlony's," said Aunt Agatha, "but I never understood that a woman was to give up her own family entirely; and your sister was born a Seton like you and me, Winnie; — I don't understand it, for my part."

Aunt Agatha broke down when she had said this, and cried more bitterly, more effusively, so long as it lasted, than she had cried last night over Hugh Ochterlony's sudden ending: and Mary could not but feel that; and as for Winnie, she sat silent, and if she did not make things worse, at least she made no effort to

make them better. On the whole, it was not much wonder. They had made great changes in the cottage for Mary's sake. Aunt Agatha had given up her parlour, her own pretty room that she loved, for a nursery, and they had made up their minds that the best chamber was to be Mary's, with a sort of sense that the fresh chintz and the pictures on the walls — it was the only bed-room that had any pictures — would make up to her if anything could. And now to find all the time that it was Francis Ochterlony, and not her own friends, that she was going to! Winnie sat quite still, with her fine profile cut out sternly against the dark green wall, looking immovable and unfeeling, as only a fine profile can under such circumstances. This was what came of Mary's placid mourning, and the dear union of family support and love into which she thought she had come. It was harder upon Mrs. Ochterlony than if Aunt Agatha had not come to meet her. She had to sit blank and silent like a criminal, and see the old lady cry and the young lady lift up the stern delicacy of that profile against her. They were disappointed in Mary; and not only were they disappointed, but mortified — wounded in their best feelings and embarrassed in secondary matters as well; for naturally Aunt Agatha had told everybody that she was going to bring her niece, Mrs. Ochterlony, and the poor dear children home.

Thus it will be seen that the first breakfast in England was a very unsatisfactory meal for Mary. She took refuge with her children when it was over, and shut up, as she had been forced to do in other days, another door in her heart; and Aunt Agatha and Winnie, on the other hand, withdrew to their apartment

and talked it over, and kindled each other's indignation. "If you knew the kind of man he was, Winnie!" Aunt Agatha said, with a severity which was not entirely on Mary's account; "not the sort of man I would trust those poor dear fatherless children with. I don't believe he has any religious principles. Dear, dear, to think how Mary should have changed! I never could have thought she would have preferred Francis Ochterlony, and turned against her own friends."

"I don't know anything about Francis Ochterlony," said Winnie, "but I know what a lot of bother we have had at home making all those changes; and your parlour that you had given up, Aunt Agatha — I must say when I think of that ——"

"That is nothing, my love," said Aunt Agatha; "I was not thinking of what I have done, I hope — as if the sacrifice was anything." But nevertheless the tears came into her eyes at the thought. It is hard when one has made a sacrifice with a liberal heart, to have it thrown back, and to feel that it is useless. This is hard, and Aunt Agatha was only human. If she had been alone, probably after the first moment of annoyance she would have gone to Mary, and the two would have cried together, and after little Hugh's prospects had been discussed, Miss Seton would have consented that it was best for her niece to go to Earlston; but then Winnie was there to talk it over and keep up Aunt Agatha's indignation. And Mary was wounded, and had retired and shut herself up among her children. And it was thus that the most trifling and uncalled-for of cares came, with little pricks of vexation and disappointment, to disturb at its very outset the

new chapter of life which Mrs. Ochterlony had imagined herself to be entering upon in such a calm of tranquillizing grief.

They were to go to London that day, and to continue their journey to the North by the night train: but it was no longer a journey in which any of the party could take any pleasure. As for Mary, in the great revulsion of her disappointment, it seemed to her as if there was no comfort for her anywhere. She had to go to Earlston to accept a home from Francis Ochterlony, whom she had never "taken to," even in her young days. And it had occurred to her that her aunt and sister would understand why, and would be sorry for her, and console her under this painful effort. When, on the contrary, they proved to be affronted and indignant, Mary's heart shut close, and retreated within itself. She could take her children into her arms and press them against her heart, as if that would do it some good: but she could not talk to the little things, nor consult them, nor share anything with them except such smiles as were practicable. To a woman who has been used to talk all her concerns over with some one, it is terrible to feel her yearnings for counsel and sympathy turned back upon her own soul, and to be struck dumb, and feel that no ear is open to her, and that in all the world there is no one living to whom her affairs are more than the affairs of a stranger. Some poor women there are who must have fellowship somehow, and who will be content with pity if sympathy is not to be had. But Mary was not of this kind of women. She shut her doors. She went in, into herself in the silence and solitude, and felt her instinctive yearning to be helped and understood come pouring back upon her

like a bitter flood. And then she looked at her little boys in their play, who had need of all from her, and could give her back but their childish fondness, and no help, or stay, or counsel. It is hard upon a woman, but yet it is a thing which every woman must confront and make up her mind to, whom God places in such circumstances. I do not know if it is easier work for a man in the same position. Mary had felt the prop of expected sympathy and encouragement and affection rudely driven from under her, and when she came in among her innocent helpless children she faced her lot, and did not deceive herself any more. To judge for herself, and do the best that in her lay, and take all the responsibilities upon her own head, whatever might follow; to know that nobody now in all the world was for her, or stood by her, except in a very secondary way, after his or her concerns and intentions and feelings had been carefully provided for in the first place. This was how her position appeared to her. And, indeed, such *was* her position, without any exaggeration. It was very kind of Francis Ochterlony to be willing to take her in, and very kind of Aunt Agatha to have made preparations for her; and kindness is sweet, and yet it is bitter, and hard, and cold, and killing to meet with. It made Mary sick to her heart, and filled her with a longing to take up her babes and rush away into some solitary corner, where nobody would ever see her again or hear of her. I do not say that she was right, or that it was a proper state of mind to be in. And Mary was too right-minded a woman to indulge in it long; but that was the feeling that momentarily took possession of her as she put the doors to in her heart, and realized that she really was alone there, and

that her concerns were hers alone, and belonged to nobody else in the world.

And, on the other hand, it was very natural for Aunt Agatha and Winnie. They knew the exertions they had made, and the flutter of generous excitement in which they had been, and their readiness to give up their best for the solace of the widow. And naturally the feeling that all their sacrifices were unnecessary and their preparations made in vain, turned the honey into gall for the moment. It was not their part to take Mary's duty into consideration, in the first place; and they did not know beforehand of Francis Ochterlony's letter, nor the poor Major's confidence that his brother would be a friend to his widow. And then Aunt Agatha's parlour, which was all metamorphosed, and the changes that had been made through the whole house! The result was, that Aunt Agatha, offended, did not so much as offer to her niece the little breathing-time Mary had hoped for. When they got to London, she re-opened the subject, but it was in an unanswerable way.

"I suppose your brother-in-law expects you?" she said. "I think it will be better to wait till to-morrow before you start, that he may send the carriage to the station for you. I don't ask you to come to me for the night, for it would be a pity to derange the children for so short a time."

"Very well, aunt," said Mary, sadly. And she wrote to Mr. Ochterlony, and slept that night in town — her strength almost failing her at the thought that, in her feebleness and excitement, she had to throw herself immediately on Francis Ochterlony's tender mercies. She even paused for a moment to think,

might she not really do as her heart suggested — find out some corner of refuge for herself with which nobody could intermeddle, and keep apart from them all? But Mary had come "home to her friends," as everybody said at the station; and she had a woman's prejudices, and it seemed unnatural to her to begin, without any interposition of the people belonging to her, that strange and solitary life of independence or self-dependence which was what she must decide upon some time. And then there was always Mr. Ochterlony's letter, which was so kind. Thus it was fixed by a few words, and could not be changed. Aunt Agatha had a terrible compunction afterwards, and could not get Mary's look out of her head, as she owned to Winnie, and would have got up out of her bed in the middle of the night, and gone to Mary and begged her to come to the cottage first, if it had not been that Winnie might have woke up, and that she would have to cross a passage to Mary's room; and in a hotel where "gentlemen" were continually about, who could tell whom she might meet? So they all slept, or pretended to sleep, and said nothing about it; and the next day set off with no further explanations, on their way "home."

CHAPTER XI.

EARLSTON is a house which lies in a little green valley among the grey folds of the Shap Fells. It is not an inviting country, though the people love it as people do love everything that belongs to them; and it has a very different aspect from the wooded dell a little farther north, where strays the romantic little Kirtell, and where Aunt Agatha's cottage smiled upon a tufted slope, with the music of the cheery river in its ears day and night. The rivers about Earlston were shallow, and ran dry in summer, though it was not because of any want of rain; and the greyness of the hills made a kind of mist in the air to unaccustomed eyes. Everybody, who has ever gone to the north that way, knows the deep cuttings about Shap, where the railway plunges through between two humid living limestone walls, where the cottages, and the fences, and the farm-houses all lead up in level tones of grey to the vast greyness of the piebald hills, and where the line of pale sky above is grey too in most cases. It was at one of the little stations in this monotonous district that Mrs. Ochterlony and her children and her ayah were deposited — Aunt Agatha, with an aspect of sternness, but a heart that smote her, and eyes that kept filling with tears she was too proud to shed, looking on the while. Winnie looked on too without the compunction, feeling very affronted and angry. They were going further on, and the thought of home was overcast to both these ladies by the fact that

everybody would ask for Mary, and that the excitement of the past few weeks would collapse in the dreariest and suddenest way when they were seen to return alone. As for Mary, she looked grey like the landscape, under her heavy veil — grey, silent, in a kind of dull despair, persuading herself that the best thing of all was to say nothing about it, and shut only more closely the doors of that heart where nobody now had any desire to come in. She lifted her little boys out, and did not care even to look if the carriage was waiting for her — and then she came to the window to bid her aunt and sister good-bye. She was so disappointed and sick-hearted, and felt for the moment that the small amount of affection and comprehension which they were capable of giving her was so little worth the trouble of seeking for, that Mary did not even ask to be written to. She put up her pale face, and said good-by in a dreary unexpectant tone that doubled the compunction in Aunt Agatha's bosom. "Oh, Mary, if you had but been coming with us!" cried that inconsistent woman, on the spur of the moment. "It is too late to speak of it now," said Mary, and kissed her and turned away; and the heartless train dashed off, and carried off Aunt Agatha with that picture in her eyes of the forlorn little group on the platform of the railway station — the two little boys clinging close to their mother, and she standing alone among strangers, with the widow's veil hanging over her colourless face. "Can you see the carriage, Winnie? — look out and tell me if you can see it," said Aunt Agatha. But the engine that carried them on was too quick for Winnie, and had already swept out of sight. And they pursued their journey, feeling

guilty and wretched, as indeed, to a certain extent, they deserved to feel. A two months' widow, with a baby and two helpless little boys — and at the best it could only be a servant who had come to meet her, and she would have everything to do for herself, and to face her brother-in-law without any support or helper. When Aunt Agatha thought of this, she sank back in her corner and sobbed. To think that she should have been the one to take offence and be affronted at Mary's first word, and desert her thus; when she might have taken her home and comforted her, and then, if it must have ended so, conveyed her to Earlston: Aunt Agatha cried, and deserved to cry, and even Winnie felt a twinge at her heart; and they got rather angry with each other before they reached home, and felt disposed to accuse each other, and trembled both of them before the idea of meeting Peggy, Miss Seton's domestic tyrant, who would rush to the door with her heart in her mouth to receive "our Miss Mary and the puir dear fatherless bairns." Mary might be silent about it, and never complain of unkindness; but it was not to be expected that Peggy would have the same scruples; and these two guilty and miserable travellers trembled at the thought of her as they made their wretched way home.

When the train had disappeared, Mary tried to take a kind of cold comfort to herself. She stood all alone, a stranger, with the few rustic passengers and rustic railway officials staring at her as if she had dropped from the skies, and no apparent sign anywhere that her coming had been looked for, or that there was any resting-place for her in this grey country. And she said to herself that it was natural, and must

always be so henceforth, and that it was best at once to accustom herself to her lot. The carriage had not come, nor any message from Earlston to say she was expected, and all that she could do was to go into the rude little waiting-room, and wait there with the tired children till some conveyance could be got to take her to her brother-in-law's house. Her thoughts would not be pleasant to put down on paper, could it be done; and yet they were not so painful as they had been the day before, when Aunt Agatha failed her, or seemed to fail. Now that disappointed craving for help and love and fellowship was over for the moment, and she had nothing but her own duty and Francis Ochterlony to encounter, who was not a man to give any occasion for vain hopes. Mary did not expect fellowship or love from her brother-in-law. If he was kind and tolerant of the children, and moderately considerate to herself, it was all that she looked for from him. Perhaps, though he had invited her, he had not been prepared to have her thrown on his hands so soon; and it might be that the domestic arrangements of Earlston were not such as to admit of the unlooked-for invasion of a lady and a nursery on such very short notice. But the most prominent feeling in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind was weariness, and that longing to escape anywhere, which is the most universal of all sentiments when the spirit is worn out and sick to death. Oh, that she had wings like a dove! — though Mary had nowhere to flee to, nobody to seek consolation from; and instead of having a home anywhere on earth awaiting her, was herself the home, the only shelter they understood, of the little pale fatherless children who clustered around her. If she could but have taken

possession of one of those poor cottages, grey and homely as they looked, and put the little ones to bed in it, and drawn a wooden chair to the fire, and been where she had a right to be! It was July, but the weather was cold at Shap, and Mary had that instinct common to wounded creatures of creeping to the fire, as if there was a kind of comfort in its warmth. She could have borne her burden bravely, or at least she thought so, if this had been what awaited her. But it was Earlston and Francis Ochterlony that awaited her — a stranger and a stranger's house. All these thoughts, and many more, were passing through her mind, as she sat in the little waiting-room with her baby in her arms, and her two elder boys pressing close to her. The children clung and appealed to her, and the helpless Hindoo woman crouched at her mistress's side; but as for Mary, there was nobody to give her any support or countenance. It was a hard opening to the stern way which had henceforward to be trodden alone.

Francis Ochterlony, however, though he had a certain superb indifference to the going-out and coming-in of trains, and had forgotten the precise hour, was not a wretch nor a brute, and had not forgotten his visitors. While Mary sat and waited, and while the master of the little station made slow but persevering search after some possible means of conveyance for her, a heavy rumbling of wheels became audible, and the carriage from Earlston made its tardy appearance. It was an old-fashioned vehicle, drawn by two horses, which betrayed their ordinary avocations much in the same way as the coachman did, who, though dressed, as they were, for the occasion, carried a breath of the fields about him, which was more convincing than any con-

ventionalism of garments. But such as it was, the Earlston carriage was not without consideration in the countryside. All the people about turned out in a leisurely way to lift the children into it, and shoulder the boxes into such corners as could be found for them — which was an affair that demanded many counsellors — and at length the vehicle got under way. Twilight began to come on as they mounted up into the grey country, by the winding grey roads fenced in with limestone walls. Everything grew greyer in the waning light. The very trees, of which there were so few, dropped into the gathering shadows, and deepened them without giving any livelier tint of colour to the scene. The children dropped asleep, and the ayah crooned and nodded over the baby; but Mary, who had no temptation to sleep, looked out with steady eyes, and, though she saw nothing distinctly, took in unawares all the comfortless chill and monotony of the landscape. It went to her heart and made her shiver. Or perhaps it was only the idea of meeting Francis Ochterlony that made her shiver. If the children, any one of them, had only been old enough to understand it a little, to clasp her hand or her neck with the exuberance of childish sympathy! But they did not understand, and dropped asleep, or asked with timid, quivering little voices, how long it would be before they got home. Home! no wonder Mrs. Ochterlony was cold, and felt the chill go to her heart. Thus they went on for six or seven weary miles, taking as many hours, as Mary thought. Aunt Agatha had arrived at her cottage, though it was nearly thirty miles further on, while the comfortless party were still jogging along in the Earlston carriage; but Mary did not think par-

ticularly of that. She did not think at all, poor soul She saw the grey hill-side gliding past her, and in a vague way, at the same moment, seemed to see herself, a bride, going gaily past on the same road, and rehearsed all the past over again with a dull pain, and shivered, and felt cold — cold to her heart. This was partly perhaps because it is chilly in Cumberland, when one has just come from India; and partly because there was something that affected a woman's fanciful imagination in the misty monotony of the limestone country, and the grey waste of the hills.

Earlston, too, was grey, as was to be expected; and the trees which surrounded it had lost colour in the night. The hall was but dimly lighted, when the door was opened — as is but too common in country houses of so retired a kind — and there was nobody ready at the instant to open the door or to receive the strangers. To be sure, people were called and came — the housekeeper first, in a silk gown, which rustled excessively, and with a certain air of patronizing affability; and then Mr. Ochterlony, who had been sitting, as he usually did, in his dressing-gown, and who had to get into his coat so hurriedly that he had not recovered from it when he shook hands with his sister-in-law; and then by degrees servants appeared, and lifted out the sleepy, startled children, who, between waking and sleeping, worn out, frightened, and excited, were precisely in the condition which it is most difficult to manage. And the ayah, who could hold no Christian communication with anybody around her, was worse than useless to her poor mistress. When Mr. Ochterlony led the way into the great, solemn, dark, dining-room — which was the nearest room at hand — the children, instead of

consenting to be led upstairs, clung with one unanimous accord to their mother. Little Wilfrid got to her arms, notwithstanding all remonstrances, and Hugh and Islay each seized silently a handful of her black dress, crushing the crape beyond all remedy. It was thus she entered Earlston, which had been her husband's birthplace, and was to be her son's inheritance — or so at least Mary thought.

"I hope you have had a pleasant journey," Mr. Ochterlony said, shaking hands with her again. "I daresay they are tired, poor little things — but you have had good weather, I hope." This he said after he had indicated to Mary a large easy-chair in carved oak, which stood by the side of the fireplace, and into which, with little Wilfrid clinging to her, and Islay and Hugh holding fast by her dress, it was not so easy to get. The master of the house did not sit down himself, for it was dreary and dark, and he was a man of fine perceptions; but he walked to the window and looked out, and then came back again to his sister-in-law. "I am glad you have had such good weather — but I am sure you must all be tired," he said.

"Yes," said Mary, who would have liked to cry, "very tired; but I hope we did not come too soon. Your letter was so kind that I thought ——"

"Oh don't speak of it," said Mr. Ochterlony; and then he stood before her on the dark hearth, and did not know what more to say. The twilight was still lingering, and there were no lights in the room, and it was fitted up with the strictest regard to propriety, and just as a dining-room ought to be. Weird gleams of dull reflection out of the depths of old mahogany lay low towards the floor, bewildering the visitor; and

there was not even the light of a fire, which, for merely conventional motives, because it was July, did not occupy its usual place; though Mary, fresh from India, and shivering with the chill of excitement and nervousness and grief, would have given anything to be within reach of one. Neither did she know what to say to her almost unknown brother-in-law, whose face even she could see very imperfectly; and the children grasped her with that tight hold which is in itself a warning, and shows that everything is possible in the way of childish fright and passion. But still it was indispensable that she should find something to say.

"My poor little boys are so young," she said, faltering. "It was very, very good of you to ask us, and I hope they wont be troublesome. I think I will ask the housekeeper to show us where we are to be. The railway tires them more than the ship did. This is Hugh," said Mary, swallowing as best she could the gasp in her throat, and detaching poor little Hugh's hand from her crape. But she had tears in her voice, and Mr. Ochterlony had a wholesome dread of crying. He gave his nephew a hurried pat on the head without looking at him, and called for Mrs. Gilsland, who was at hand among the shadows rustling with her silk gown.

"Oh!" he said hurriedly. "A fine little fellow I am sure; — but you are quite right, and they must be tired, and I will not detain you. Dinner is at seven," said Mr. Ochterlony. What could he say? He could not even see the faces of the woman and children whom it was his dread but evident duty to receive. When they went away under Mrs. Gilsland's charge, he followed them to the foot of the stairs, and stood look-

ing after them as the procession mounted, guided by the rustle of the housekeeper's gown. The poor man looked at them in a bewildered way, and then went off to his library, where his own shaded lamp was lit, and where everything was cosy and familiar. Arrived there, he threw himself into his own chair with a sigh. He was not a brute, nor a wretch, as we have said, and the least thing he could do when he heard of his poor brother's death was to offer a shelter — temporarily at least — to the widow and her children: but perhaps a lurking hope that something might turn up to prevent the invasion had been in his mind up to this day. Now she was here, and what was he to do with her? Now *they* were here, which was still more serious — three boys (even though one of them was a baby) in a house full of everything that was daintiest and rarest and most delicate! No wonder Mr. Ochterlony was momentarily stupefied by their arrival; and then he had not even seen their faces to know what they were like. He remembered Mary of old in her bride-days, but then she was too young, too fresh, too unsubdued to please him. If she were as full of vigour and energy now, what was to become of a quiet man who, above all things, loved tranquillity and leisure? This was what Francis Ochterlony was thinking as his visitors went up-stairs.

Mrs. Ochterlony was inducted into the best rooms in the house. Her brother-in-law was not an effusive or sympathetic man by nature, but still he knew what was his duty under the circumstances. Two great rooms gleaming once more with ebon gleams out of big wardrobes and half-visible mirrors, with beds that looked a little like hearses, and heavy solemn hangings.

Mrs. Gilsland's silk gown rustled about everywhere, pointing out a thousand conveniences unknown at the station; but all Mary was thinking about was one of those grey cottages on the road, with the fire burning brightly, and its little homely walls lighted up with the fitful, cheerful radiance. If she could but have had a fire, and crept up to it, and knelt on the hearth and held herself to the comforting warmth! There are times when a poor creature feels all body, just as there are times when she feels all soul. And then, to think that dinner was at seven! just as it had been when she came there with Hugh, a girl all confident of happiness and life. No doubt Mr. Ochterlony would have forgiven his sister-in-law, and probably indeed would have been as much relieved as she, if she had but sent an apology and stayed in her room all the evening. But Mary was not the kind of woman to do this. It did not occur to her to depart from the natural routine, or make so much talk about her own feelings or sentiments as would be necessary even to excuse her. What did it matter? If it had to be done, it had to be done, and there was nothing more to be said. This was the view her mind took of most matters; and she had always been well, and never had any pretext to get out of things she did not like, as women do who have headaches and handy little illnesses. She could always do what was needful, and did always do it without stopping to make any questions; which is a serviceable kind of temperament in life, and yet subjects people to many little martyrdoms which otherwise they might escape from. Though her heart was sick, she put on her best gown all covered with crape, and her widow's cap, and went down to dine with Francis Ochterlony in the great

dining-room, leaving her children behind, and longing unspeakably for that cottage with the fire.

It was not such an unbecoming dress after all, notwithstanding what people say. Mary was worn and sad, but she was not faded; and the dead white of the cap that encircled her face, and the dead black of her dress, did nót do so much harm as perhaps they ought to have done to that sweet and steadfast grace, which had made the regiment recognise and adopt young Stafford's fanciful title. She was still Madonna Mary under that disfigurement; and on the whole she was *not* disfigured by her dress. Francis Ochterlony lifted his eyes with equal surprise and satisfaction to take a second look at poor Hugh's widow. He felt by instinct that Phidias himself could not have filled a corner in his drawing-room, which was so full of fine things, with a figure more fair or half so appropriate as that of the serene woman who now took her seat there, abstracted a little into the separation and remoteness of sorrow, but with no discord in her face. He liked her better so than with the group of children, who made her look as if she were a Charity, and the heavy veil hanging half over her face, which had a conventual and uncomfortable effect; and he was very courteous and attentive to his sister-in-law. "I hope you had good weather," he said in his deferential way; "and I trust, when you have been a few days at Earlston, the fatigue will wear off. You will find everything very quiet here."

"I hope so," said Mary; "but it is the children I am thinking of. I trust our rooms are a long distance off, and that we will not disturb you."

"That is quite a secondary matter," said Mr. Ochter-

lony. "The question is, are you comfortable? I hope you will let Mrs. Gilsland know if anything is wanted. We are not — not quite used to these sort of things, you know; but I am sure, if anything is wanted ——"

"You are very kind," said Mary; "I am sure we shall be very comfortable." And yet as she said so her thoughts went off with a leap to that little cottage interior, and the cheerful light that shone out of the window, and the fire that crackled and blazed within. Ah, if she were but there! not dining with Mr. Ochterlony in solemn grandeur, but putting her little boys to bed, and preparing their supper for them, and cheating away heavy thoughts by that dear common work for the comfort and service of her own which a woman loves. But this was not a sort of longing to give expression to at Earlston, where in the evening Mr. Ochterlony was very kind to his sister-in-law, and showed her a great many priceless things which Mary regarded with trembling, thinking of two small barbarians about to be let loose among them, not to speak of little Wilfrid, who was old enough to dash an Etruscan vase to the earth, or upset the rarest piece of china, though he was still only a baby. She could not tell how they were so much as to walk through that drawing-room without doing some harm, and her heart sank within her as she listened to all those loving lingering descriptions which only a virtuoso can make. Mr. Ochterlony retired that evening with a sense always agreeable to a man, that in doing a kind thing he had not done a foolish one, and that the children of such a fair and gracious woman could not be the graceless imps who had been haunting his dreams ever since he knew they were coming home; but Mary for her part

took no such flattering unction to her soul. She sighed as she went upstairs sad and weary to the great sombre room, in which a couple of candles burned like tiny stars in a world of darkness, and looked at her sleeping boys, and wondered what they were to do in this collection of curiosities and beauties. She was an ignorant woman, and did not, alas! care anything at all for the Venus Anadyomene. But she thought of little Hugh tilting that marble lady and her pedestal over, and shook and trembled at the idea. She trembled too with cold and nervous agitation, and the chill of sorrow in her heart. In the lack of other human sources of consolation, oh! to go to that cottage hearth, and kneel down and feel to one's very soul the comfort of the warm sonsoling fire.

CHAPTER XII.

It had need to be a mind which has reached the last stage of human sentiment which can altogether resist the influence of a lovely summer morning, all made of warmth, and light, and softened sounds, and far-off odours. Mrs. Ochterlony had not reached this last stage; she was still young, and she was only at the beginning of her loneliness, and her heart had not sickened at life, as hearts do sometimes which have made a great many repeated efforts to live, and have had to give in again and again. When she saw the sunshine lying in a supreme peacefulness upon those grey hills, and all the pale sky and blue depths of air beaming softly with that daylight which comes from

God, her courage came back to her in spite of herself. She began the morning by the shedding of those silent tears which are all the apology one can make to one's dead, for having the heart to begin another day without them; and when that moment was over, and the children had lifted all their daylight faces in a flutter of curiosity and excitement about this new "home" they had come to, after so long talking of it and looking forward to it, things did not seem so dark to Mary as on the previous evening. For one thing, the sun was warm and shone in at her windows, which made a great difference; and with her children's voices in her ears, and their faces fresh in the morning light, what woman could be altogether without courage? "So long as they are well," she said to herself — and went down stairs a little consoled, to pour out Mr. Ochterlony's coffee for him, thanking heaven in her heart that her boys were to have a meal which had nothing calm nor classical about it, in the old nursery where their father had once eaten his breakfasts, and which had been hurriedly prepared for them. "The little dears must go down after dinner; but master, ma'am — well, he's an old bachelor, you know," said Mrs. Gilsland, while explaining this arrangement. "Oh, thank you; I hope you will help me to keep them from disturbing him," Mary had said; and thus it was with a lighter heart that she went down stairs.

Mr. Ochterlony came down too at the same time in an amiable frame of mind. Notwithstanding that he had to put himself into a morning coat, and abjured his dressing-gown, which was somewhat of a trial for a man of fixed habits, nothing could exceed the graciousness of his looks. A certain horrible notion com-

mon to his class, that children scream all night long, and hold an entire household liable to be called up at any moment, had taken possession of his mind. But his tired little guests had been swallowed up in the silence of the house, and had neither screamed, nor shouted, nor done anything to disturb its habitual quiet; and the wonderful satisfaction of having done his duty, and not having suffered for it, had entered Mr. Ochterlony's mind. It is in such circumstances that the sweet sense of well-doing, which is generally supposed the best reward of virtue, settles upon a good man's spirits. The Squire might be premature in his self-congratulations, but then his sense of relief was exquisite. If nothing worse was to come of it than the presence of a fair woman, whose figure was always in drawing, and who never put herself into an awkward attitude — whose voice was soft, and her movements tranquil, Mrs. Ochterlony felt that self-sacrifice after all was practicable. The boys could be sent to school as all boys were, and at intervals might be endured when there was nothing else for it. Thus he came down in a benign condition, willing to be pleased. As for Mary, the first thing that disturbed her calm, was the fact that she was herself of no use at her brother-in-law's breakfast-table. He made his coffee himself, and then he went into general conversation in the kindest way, to put her at her ease.

"That is the Farnese Hercules," he said; "I saw it caught your eye last night. It is from a cast I had made for the purpose, and is considered very perfect; and that you know is the new Pallas, the Pallas that was found in the Sestina Villa; you recollect, perhaps?"

"I am afraid not," said Mary, faltering; and she looked at them, poor soul, with wistful eyes, and tried to feel a little interest. "I have been so long out of the way of everything ——"

"To be sure," said the Squire, encouragingly, "and my poor brother Hugh, I remember, knew very little about it. He went early to India, and had few advantages, poor fellow." All this Mr. Ochterlony said while he was concocting his coffee; and Mary had nothing to do but to sit and listen to him with her face fully open to his inspection if he liked, and no kindly urn before her to hide the sudden rush of tears and indignation. A man who spent his life having casts made, and collecting what Mary in her heart with secret rage called "pretty things!" — that he should make a complacent contrast between himself and his brother! The suggestion filled Mrs. Ochterlony with a certain speechless fury which was born of her grief.

"He knew well how to do his duty," she said, as soon as she could speak; and she would not let her tears fall, but opened her burning eyes wide, and absorbed them somehow out of pride for Hugh.

"Poor fellow!" said his brother, daintily pouring out the fragrant coffee. "I don't know if he ever could have had much appreciation of Art; but I am sure he made a good soldier, as you say. I was very much moved and shocked when I heard — but do not let us talk of such painful subjects; another time, perhaps —"

And Mary sat still with her heart beating, and said no more — thinking through all the gentle flow of conversation that followed of the inconceivable conceit

that could for a moment class Francis Ochterlony's dilettante life with that of her dead Hugh, who had played a man's part in the world, and had the heart to die for his duty's sake. And this useless Squire could speak of the few advantages he had! It was unreasonable, for, to tell the truth, the Squire was much more accomplished, much better instructed than the Major. The Numismatic Society and the Society of Antiquaries, and even, on certain subjects, the British Association, would have listened to Francis Ochterlony as if he had been a messenger from heaven. Whereas Hugh the soldier would never have got a hearing nor dared to open his lips in any learned presence. But then that did not matter to his wife, who, notwithstanding her many high qualities, was not a perfectly reasonable woman. Those "few advantages" stood terribly in Mary's way for that first morning. They irritated her far more than Mr. Ochterlony could have had the least conception or understanding of. If anybody had given him a glass to look into her heart with, the Squire would have been utterly confounded by what he saw there. What had he done? And indeed he had done nothing that anybody (in his senses) could have found fault with; he had but turned Mary's thoughts once more with a violent longing to the roadside cottage, where at least, if she and her children were but safely housed, her soldier's memory would be shrined, and his sword hung up upon the homely wall, and his name turned into a holy thing. Whereas he was only a younger brother who had gone away to India, and had few advantages, in the Earlston way of thinking. This was the uppermost thought in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind as her brother-in-law exhibited all

his collections to her. The drawing-room, which she had but imperfectly seen in her weariness and preoccupation the previous night, was a perfect museum of things rich and rare. There were delicate marbles, tiny but priceless, standing out white and ethereal against the soft, carefully chosen, toned crimson of the curtains; and bronzes that were worth half a year's income of the lands of Earlston; and Etruscan vases and Pompeian relics; and hideous dishes with lizards on them, besides plaques of dainty porcelain with Raphael's designs; the very chairs were fantastic with inlaying and gilding — curious articles, some of them worth their weight in gold; and if you but innocently looked at an old cup and saucer on a dainty table wondering what it did there, it turned out to be the ware of Henri II., and priceless. To see Mary going over all this with her attention preoccupied and wandering, and yet a wistful interest in her eyes, was a strange sight. All that she had in the world was her children, and the tiny little income of a soldier's widow — and you may suppose perhaps that she was thinking what a help to her and the still more valuable little human souls she had to care for, would have been the money's-worth of some of these fragile beauties. But that was not what was in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind. What occupied her, on the contrary, was an indignant wonder within herself how a man who spent his existence upon such trifles (they looked trifles to her, from her point of view, and in this of course she was still unreasonable) could venture to look down with complacency upon the real life, so honestly lived and so bravely ended, of his brother Hugh — poor Hugh, as he ventured to call him. Mr. Ochterlony might die a dozen times over,

and what would his marble Venus care, that he was so proud of? But it was Hugh who had died; and it was a kind of comfort to feel that *he* at least, though they said he had few advantages, had left one faithful woman behind him to keep his grave green for ever.

The morning passed, however, though it was a long morning; and Mary looked into all the cabinets of coins and precious engraved gems, and rare things of all sorts, with a most divided attention and wandering mind — thinking where were the children? were they out-of-doors? were they in any trouble? for the unearthly quietness in the house seemed to her experienced mother's ear to bode harm of some kind — either illness or mischief, and most likely the last. As for Mr. Ochterlony, it never occurred to him that his sister-in-law, while he was showing her his collections, should not be as indifferent as he was to any vulgar outside influence. "We shall not be disturbed," he said, with a calm reassuring smile, when he saw her glance at the door; "Mrs. Gilsland knows better," and he drew out another drawer of coins as he spoke. Poor Mary began to tremble, but the same sense of duty which made her husband stand to be shot at, kept her at her post. She went through with it like a martyr, without flinching, though longing, yearning, dying to get free. If she were but in that cottage, looking after her little boys' dinner, and hearing their voices as they played at the door — their servant and her own mistress, instead of the helpless slave of courtesy, and interest, and her position, looking at Francis Ochterlony's curiosities! When she escaped at last, Mary found that indeed her fears had not been without foundation. There had been some small breakages, and some small quarrels in the

nursery, where Hugh and Islay had been engaged in single combat, and where baby Wilfrid had joined in with impartial kicks and scratches, to the confusion of both combatants: all which alarming events the frightened ayah had been too weak-minded and helpless to prevent. And, by way of keeping them quiet, that bewildered woman had taken down a beautiful Indian canoe, which stood on a bracket in the corridor, and the boys, as was natural, with true scientific inquisitiveness had made researches into its constitution, such as horrified their mother. Mary was so cowardly as to put the boat together again with her own hands, and put it back on its bracket, and say nothing about it, with devout hopes that nobody would find it out — which, to be sure, was a terrible example to set before children. She breathed freely for the first time when she got them out — out of Earlston — out of Earlston grounds — to the hill-side, where, though everything was grey, the turf had a certain greenness, and the sky a certain blueness, and the sun shone warm, and nameless little English wild flowers were to be found among the grass; nameless things, too insignificant for anything but a botanist to classify, and Mrs. Ochterlony was no botanist. She put down Wilfrid on the grass, and sat by him, and watched for a little the three joyful unthinking creatures, harmonized without knowing it by their mother's presence, rolling about in an unaccustomed ecstacy upon the English grass; and then Mary went back, without being quite aware of it, into the darker world of her own mind, and leant her head upon her hands and began to think.

She had a great deal to think about. She had come home obeying the first impulse, which suggested that

a woman left alone in the world should put herself under the guidance and protection of "her friends:" and, in the first stupor of grief, it was a kind of consolation to think that she had still somebody belonging to her, and could put off those final arrangements for herself and by herself which one time or other must be made. When she decided upon this, Mary did not realize the idea of giving offence to Aunt Agatha by accepting Francis Ochterlony's invitation, nor of finding herself at Earlston in the strange nondescript position — something less than a member of the family, something more than a visitor — which she at present occupied. Her brother-in-law was very kind, but he did not know what to do with her; and her brother-in-law's household was very doubtful and uneasy, with a certain alarmed and suspicious sense that it might be a new and permanent mistress who had thus come in upon them — an idea which it was not to be expected that Mrs. Gilsland, who had been in authority so long, should take kindly to. And then it was hard for Mary to live in a house where her children were simply tolerated, and in constant danger of doing inestimable mischief. She sat upon the grey hill-side, and thought over it till her head ached. Oh, for that wayside cottage with the blazing fire! but Mrs. Ochterlony had no such refuge. She had come to Earlston of her own will, and she could not fly away again at once to affront and offend the only relation who might be of service to her boys — which was, no doubt, a sadly mercenary view to take of the subject. She stayed beside her children all day, feeling like a prisoner, afraid to move or to do anything, afraid to let the boys play or give scope to their limbs and voice. And then

Hugh, though he was not old enough to sympathize with her, was old enough to put terrible questions. "Why shouldn't we make a noise?" the child said; "is my uncle a king, mamma, that we must not disturb him? Papa never used to mind." Mary sent her boy back to his play when he said this, with a sharp impatience which he could not understand. Ah, how different it was! and how stinging the pain that went to her heart at that suggestion. But then little Hugh, thank heaven, knew no better. Even the Hindoo woman, who had been a faithful woman in her way, but who was going back again with another family bound for India, began to make preparations for her departure; and, after that, Mrs. Ochterlony's position would be still more difficult. This was how the first day at Earlston — the first day at home, as the children said — passed over Mary. It was, perhaps, of all other trials, the one most calculated to take from her any strength she might have left. And after all this she had to dress at seven o'clock, and leave her little boys in the big dark nursery, and go down to keep her brother-in-law company at dinner, to hear him talk of the Farnese Hercules, and of his collections, and travels, and, perhaps, of the "few advantages" his poor brother had had: which for a woman of a high spirit and independent character, and profound loyal love for the dead, was a very hard ordeal to bear.

The dinner, however, went over very fairly. Mr. Ochterlony was the soul of politeness, and, besides, he was pleased with his sister-in-law. She knew nothing about Art; but then, she had been long in India, and was a woman, and it was not to be wondered at. He meant no harm when he spoke about poor Hugh's few

advantages. He knew that he had a sensible woman to deal with, and of course grief and that sort of thing cannot last for ever; and, on the whole, Mr. Ochterlony saw no reason why he should not speak quite freely of his brother Hugh; and lament his want of proper training. *She* must have known that as well as he did. And, to tell the truth, he had forgotten about the children. He made himself very agreeable, and even went so far as to say that it was very pleasant to be able to talk over these matters with somebody who understood him. Mary sat waiting with a mixture of fright and expectation for the appearance of the children, who the housekeeper said were to come down to dessert; but they did not come, and nothing was said about them; and Mr. Ochterlony was fond of foreign habits, and took very little wine, and accompanied his sister-in-law upstairs when she left the table. He came with her in that troublesome French way with which Mary was not even acquainted, and made it impossible for her to hurry through the long passages to the nursery, and see what her forlorn little boys were about. What could they be doing all this time, lost at the other end of the great house where she could not even hear their voices, nor that soft habitual nursery hum which was a necessary accompaniment to her life? She had to sit down in a kind of despair and talk to Mr. Ochterlony, who took a seat beside her, and was very friendly. The summer evening had begun to decline, and it was at this meditative moment that the master of Earlston liked to sit and contemplate his Psyche and his Venus, and call a stranger's attention to their beauties, and tell pleasant anecdotes about how he picked them up. Mrs. Ochterlony sat by her brother-in-law's side, and

listened to his talk about Art with her ear strained to the most intense attention, prepared at any moment to hear a shriek from the outraged housekeeper, or a howl of unanimous woe from three culpable and terrified voices. There was something comic in the situation, but Mary's attention was not sufficiently disengaged to be amused.

"I have long wished to have some information about Indian Art," said Mr. Ochterlony. "I should be glad to know what an intelligent observer like yourself, with some practical knowledge, thought of my theory. My idea is — But I am afraid you have a headache? I hope you have all the attention you require, and are comfortable? It would give me great pain to think that you were not perfectly comfortable. You must not feel the least hesitation in telling me —"

"Oh no, we have everything," said Mary. She thought she heard something outside like little steps and distant voices, and her heart began to beat. But as for her companion, he was not thinking about such extraneous things.

"I hope so," said Mr. Ochterlony; and then he looked at his Psyche with the lingering look of a connoisseur, dwelling lovingly upon her marble beauty. "You must have that practical acquaintance which, after all, is the only thing of any use," he continued. "My idea is —"

And it was at this moment that the door was thrown open, and they all rushed in — all, beginning with little Wilfrid, who had just commenced to walk, and who came with a tottering dash, striking against a pedestal in his way, and making its precious burden tremble. Outside at the open door appeared for an

instant the ayah as she had set down her charge, and Mrs. Gilsland, gracious but formidable, in her rustling gown, who had headed the procession. Poor woman, she meant no harm, but it was not in the heart of woman to believe that in the genial hour after dinner, when all the inner and the outer man was mollified and comforted, the sight of three such "bonnie boys," all curled, brushed, and shining for the occasion, could disturb Mr. Ochterlony. Baby Wilfrid dashed across the room in a straight line with "flicherin' noise and glee" to get to his mother, and the others followed, not, however, without stoppages on the way. They were bonnie boys — brave, little, erect, clear-eyed creatures, who had never known anything but love in their lives, and feared not the face of man; and to Mary, though she quaked and trembled, their sudden appearance changed the face of everything, and made the Earlston drawing-room glorious. But the effect was different upon Mr. Ochterlony, as might be supposed.

"How do you do, my little man," said the discomfited uncle. "Oh, this is Hugh, is it? I think he is like his father. I suppose you intend to send them to school. Good heavens! my little fellow, take care!" cried Mr. Ochterlony. The cause of this sudden animation was, that Hugh, naturally facing his uncle when he was addressed by him, had leant upon the pillar on which Psyche stood with her immortal lover. He had put his arm round it with a vague sense of admiration, and as he stood was, as Mary thought, a prettier sight than even the lovely group above; but Mr. Ochterlony could not be expected to be of Mary's mind.

"Come here, Hugh," said his mother, anxiously.

"You must not touch anything; your uncle will kindly let you look at them, but you must not touch. It was so different, you know, in our Indian house — and then on board ship," said Mary, faltering. Islay, with his big head thrown back a little, and his hands in his little trousers pockets, was roving about all the while in a manly way, inspecting everything, looking, as his mother thought, for the most favourable opening for mischief. What was she to do? They might do more damage in ten minutes than ten years of her little income could set right. As for Mr. Ochterlony, though he groaned in spirit, nothing could overcome his politeness; he turned his back upon little Hugh, so that at least he might not see what was going on, and resumed the conversation with all the composure that he could assume.

"You will send them to school of course," he said; "we must inquire for a good school for them. I don't myself think that children can begin their education too soon. I don't speak of the baby," said Mr. Ochterlony, with a sigh. The baby evidently was inevitable. Mary had set him down at her feet, and he sat there in a peaceable way, making no assault upon anything, which was consolatory at least.

"They are so young," said Mary, tremulously.

"Yes, they are young, and it is all the better," said the uncle. His eye was upon Islay, who had sprung upon a chair, and was riding and spurring it with delightful energy. Naturally, it was a unique rococo chair of the daintiest and most fantastic workmanship, and the unhappy owner expected to see it fall into sudden destruction before his eyes; but he was benumbed by politeness and despair, and took no

notice. "There is nothing," said the poor man with distracted attention, his eye upon Islay, his face turned to his sister-in-law, and horror in his heart, "like good training begun early. For my part —"

"Oh, mamma, look here. How funny this is!" cried little Hugh. When Mary turned sharply round in despair, she found her boy standing behind her with a priceless Etruscan vase in his hand. He had just taken it from the top of a low, carved bookcase, where the companion vase still stood, and held it tilted up as he might have held a drinking mug in the nursery. "It's a fight," cried Hugh; "look mamma, how that fellow is putting his lance into him. Isn't it jolly? Why don't *we* have some brown sort of jugs with battles on them, like this?"

"What is it? Let *me* see," cried Islay, and he gave a flying leap, and brought the rococo chair down on its back, where he remounted leisurely after he had cast a glance at the brown sort of jug. "I don't think it's worth looking at," said the four-year-old hero. Mrs. Ochterlony heard her brother-in-law say, "Good heavens!" again, and heard him groan as he turned away his head. He could not forget that they were his guests and his dead brother's children, and he could not turn them out of the room or the house, as he was tempted to do; but at the same time he turned away that at least he might not see the full extent of the ruin. As for Mary, she felt her own hand tremble as she took the vase out of Hugh's careless grasp. She was terrified to touch its brittle beauty, though she was not so enthusiastic about it as, perhaps, she ought to have been. And it was with a sudden impulse of des-

peration that she caught up her baby, and lifted Islay off the prostrate chair.

"I hope you will excuse them," she said, all flushed and trembling. "They are so little, and they know no better. But they must not stay here," and with that poor Mary swept them out with her, making her way painfully over the dangerous path, where snares and perils lay on every side. She gave the astonished Islay an involuntary "shake" as she dropped him in the sombre corridor outside, and hurried along towards the darkling nursery. The little flock of wicked black sheep trotted by her side full of questions and surprise. "Why are we coming away? What have we done?" said Hugh. "Mamma! mamma! tell me!" and Islay pulled at her dress, and made more demonstratively the same demand. What had they done? If Mr. Ochterlony, left by himself in the drawing-room, could but have answered the question! He was on his knees beside his injured chair, examining its wounds, and as full of tribulation as if those fantastic bits of tortured wood had been flesh-and-blood. And to tell the truth, the misfortune was greater than if it had been flesh-and-blood. If Islay Ochterlony's sturdy little legs had been broken, there was a doctor in the parish qualified to a certain extent to mend them. But who was there among the Shap Fells, or within a hundred miles of Earlston, who was qualified to touch the delicate members of a rococo chair? He groaned over it as it lay prostate, and would not be comforted. Children! imps! come to be the torture of his life, as, no doubt, they had been of poor Hugh's. What could Providence be thinking of to send such reckless, heedless, irresponsible creatures into the world? A vague notion that

their mother would whip them all round as soon as she got them into the shelter of the nursery, gave Mr. Ochterlony a certain consolation; but even that judicial act, though a relief to injured feeling, would do nothing for the fractured chair.

Mary, we regret to say, did not whip the boys when she got into her own apartments. They deserved it, no doubt, but she was only a weak woman. Instead of that, she put her arms round the three, who were much excited and full of wonder, and very restless in her clasp, and cried — not much, but suddenly, in an outburst of misery and desolation. After all, what was the vase or the Psyche in comparison with the living creatures thus banished to make place for them? which was a reflection which some people may be far from acquiescing in, but that came natural to her, being their mother, and not in any special way interested in art. She cried, but she only hugged her boys and kissed them, and put them to bed, lingering that she might not have to go downstairs again till the last moment. When she went at last, and made Mr. Ochterlony's tea for him, that magnanimous man did not say a word, and even accepted her apologies with a feeble deprecation. He had put the wounded article away, and made a sublime resolution to take no further notice. "Poor thing, it is not her fault," he said to himself; and, indeed, had begun to be sorry for Mary, and to think what a pity it was that a woman so unobjectionable should have three such imps to keep her in hot water. But he looked sad, as was natural. He swallowed his tea with a sigh, and made mournful cadences to every sentence he uttered. A man does not easily get over such a shock; — it is different with

a frivolous and volatile woman, who may forget or may dissimulate, and look as if she does not care; but a man is not so lightly moved or mended. If it had been Islay's legs, as has been said, there was a doctor within reach; but who in the north country could be trusted so much as to look at the delicate limbs of a rococo chair?

CHAPTER XIII.

The experience of this evening, though it was only the second of her stay at Earlston, proved to Mary that the visit she was paying to her brother-in-law must be made as short as possible. She could not get up and run away because Hugh had put an Etruscan vase in danger, and Islay had broken his uncle's chair. It was Mr. Ochterlony who was the injured party, and he was magnanimously silent, saying nothing, and even giving no intimation that the presence of these objectionable little visitors was not to be desired in the drawing-room; and Mary had to stay and keep her boys out of sight, and live consciously upon sufferance, in the nursery and her bedroom, until she could feel warranted in taking leave of her brother-in-law, who, without doubt, meant to be kind. It was a strange sort of position, and strangely out of accord with her character and habits. She had never been rich, nor lived in such a great house, but she had always up to this time been her own mistress — mistress of her actions, free to do what she thought best, and to manage her children according to her own wishes. Now

she had, to a certain extent, to submit to the housekeeper, who changed their hours, and interfered with their habits at her pleasure. The poor ayah went weeping away, and nobody was to be had to replace her except one of the Earlston maids, who naturally was more under Mrs. Gilsland's authority than Mrs. Ochterlony's; and to this girl Mary had to leave them when she went down to the inevitable dinner which had always to be eaten downstairs. She made several attempts to consult her brother-in-law upon her future, but Mr. Ochterlony, though very polite, was not a sympathetic listener. He had received the few details which she had been moved at first, with restrained tears, to give him about the Major, with a certain restlessness which chilled Mary. He was sorry for his brother; but he was one of those men who do not care to talk about dead people, and who think it best not to revive and recall sorrow — which would be very true and just if true sorrow had any occasion to be revived and recalled; and her own arrangements were all more or less connected with this (as Mr. Ochterlony called it) painful subject. And thus it was that her hesitating efforts to make her position clear to him, and to get any advice which he could give, was generally put aside or swallowed up in some communication from the Numismatic Society, or questions which she could not answer about Indian art.

"We must leave Earlston soon," Mrs. Ochterlony took courage to say one day, when the housekeeper, and the continued exclusion of the children, and her own curious life on sufferance, had been too much for her. "If you are at leisure, would you let me speak to you about it? I have so little experience of any

thing but India — and I want to do what is best for my boys."

"Oh — ah — yes," said Mr. Ochterlony, "you must send them to school. We must try and hear of some good school for them. It is the only thing you can do —"

"But they are so young," said Mary. "At their age they are surely best with their mother. Hugh is only seven. If you could advise me where it would be best to go —"

"Where it would be best to go!" said Mr. Ochterlony. He was a little surprised, and not quite pleased for the moment. "I hope you do not find yourself uncomfortable here?"

"Oh, no," said Mary, faltering; "but — they are very young and troublesome, and — I am sure they must worry you. Such little children are best by themselves," she said, trying to smile — and thus, by chance, touched a chord of pity in her brother-in-law's heart.

"Ah," he said, shaking his head, "I assure you I feel the painfulness of your position. If you had been unencumbered, you might have looked forward to so different a life; but with such a burden as these children, and you so young still —"

"Burden?" said Mary; and it may be supposed how her eyes woke up, and what a colour came to her cheek, and how her heart took to beating under her crape. "You can't really think *my* children are a burden to me? Ah! you don't know — I would not care to live another day if I had not my boys."

And here, her nerves being weak with all she had come through, she would have liked to cry — but did

not, the moment being unsuitable, and only sat facing the virtuoso, all lighted up and glowing, brightened by indignation, and surprise, and sudden excitement, to something more like the former Mary than ever yet had been seen underneath her widow's cap.

"Oh!" said Mr. Ochterlony. He could have understood the excitement had it been about a Roman camp or a newly-discovered statue; but boys did not commend themselves in the same way to his imagination. He liked his sister-in-law, however, in his way. She was a good listener, and pleasant to look at, and even when she was unintelligible was never without grace, or out of drawing, and he felt disposed even to take a little trouble for her. "You *must* send them to school," he said. "There is nothing else to be done. I will write to a friend of mine who knows about such matters; and I am sure, for my part, I shall be very glad if you can make yourself comfortable at Earlston — you and — and the baby, of course," Mr. Ochterlony said, with a slightly wry face. The innocent man had not an idea of the longing she had for that cottage with the fire in it. It was a notion which never could have been made intelligible to him, even had he been told in words.

"Thank you," said Mary, faltering more and more; indeed she made a dead pause, and he thought she had accepted his decision, and that there was to be no more about it — which was comforting and satisfactory. He had just risen up to leave the room, breakfast being over, when she put out her hand to stop him. "I will not detain you a minute," she said, "it is so desolate to have no one to tell me what to do. Indeed, we cannot stay here — though it is so good of you; they

are too young to leave me, and I care for nothing else in life," Mrs. Ochterlony said, yielding for an instant to her emotion; but she soon recovered herself. "There are good schools all over England, I have heard; in places where we could live cheaply. That is what I want to do. Near one of the good grammar-schools. I am quite free; it does not matter where I live. If you would give me your advice," she added, timidly. Mr. Ochterlony, for his part, was taken so much by surprise that he stood between the table and the door, with one foot raised to go on, and not believing his ears. He had behaved like an angel, to his own conviction, and had never said a word about the chair, though it had to be sent to town to be repaired. He had continued to afford shelter to the little ruffian who did it, and had carefully abstained from all expression of his feelings. What could the woman want more? — and what should he know about grammar-schools, and places where people could live cheaply? A woman, too, whom he liked, and had explained his theory of ancient art more fully to than he had ever done to any one. And she wanted to leave Earlston and his society, and the Psyches and Venuses, to settle down in some half-pay neighbourhood, where people with large families lived for the sake of education. No wonder Mr. Ochterlony turned round, struck dumb with wonder, and came slowly back before giving his opinion, which, but for an unexpected circumstance, would no doubt have been such an opinion as to overwhelm his companion with confusion, and put an instant stop to her foolish plans.

But circumstances come wildly in the way of the best intentions, and cut off the wisest speech sometimes

on a man's very lips. At this moment the door opened softly, and a new interlocutor presented herself. The apparition was one which took not only the words but the very breath from the lips of the master of Earlston. Aunt Agatha was twenty years older than her niece, but so was Francis Ochterlony; and such a thing was once possible as that the soft ancient maiden and the elderly solitary dilettante might have made a cheerful human household at Earlston. They had not met for years, not since the time when Miss Seton was holding on by her lingering youth, and looking forward to the loss of it with an anxious and care-worn countenance. She was twenty times prettier now than she had been in those days — prettier perhaps, if the truth were told, than she ever had been in her life. She was penitent, too, and tearful in her white-haired sweetness, though Mr. Ochterlony did not know why — with a soft colour coming and going on her cheeks, and a wistful look in her dewy eyes. She had left her home at least two hours before, and came carrying all the freshness and odours of the morning, surrounded with sunshine and sweet air, and everything that seems to belong to the young. Francis Ochterlony was so bewildered by the sight that he stepped back out of her way, and could not have told whether she was eighteen or fifty. Perhaps the sight of him had in some degree the same effect upon Aunt Agatha. She made a little rush at Mary, who had risen to meet her, and threw herself, soft little woman as she was, upon her niece's taller form. "Oh, my dear love, I have been a silly old woman — forgive me!" said Aunt Agatha. She had put up with the estrangement as long as ever it was in human nature to put up with it. She had borne

Peggy's sneers, and Winnie's heartless suggestions that it was her own doing. How was Winnie to know what made it so difficult for her to have any communications with Earlston? But finally Aunt Agatha's heart had conquered everything else. She had made such pictures to herself of Mary, solitary and friendless ("for what is a Man? no company when one is unhappy," Miss Seton had said to herself with unconscious eloquence), until instinct and impulse drove her to this decided step. The hall door at Earlston had been standing open, and there was nobody to announce her. And this was how Aunt Agatha arrived just at the critical moment, cutting off Mr. Ochterlony's utterance when he was on the very point of speech.

The poor man, for his part, did not know what to do; after the first moment of amaze he stood dumb and humble, with his hand stretched out, waiting to greet his unexpected visitor. But the truth was, that the two women as they clung together were both so dreadfully disposed to cry that they dared not face Mr. Ochterlony. The sudden touch of love and unlooked-for sympathy had this effect upon Mary, who had been agitated and disturbed before; and as for Aunt Agatha, she was not an old maid by conviction, and perhaps would not have objected to this house or its master, and the revival of these old associations was hard upon her. She clasped Mary tight, as if it was all for Mary's sake; but perhaps there was also a little personal feeling involved. Mr. Ochterlony stood speechless for a moment, and then he heard a faint sob, and fled in consternation. If that was coming, it was high time for him to go. He went away and took refuge in his library, in a confused and uncomfortable state of mind. This was the result

of having a woman in the house; a man who had nothing to do in his own person with the opposite half of humanity became subject to the invasion of other women, and still worse, to the invasion of recollections and feelings which he had no wish to have recalled. What did Agatha Seton mean by looking so fresh and fair at her age? and yet she had white hair too, and called herself an old woman. These thoughts came dreadfully in his way when he sat down to work. He was writing a monograph upon Icelandic art, and naturally had been much interested in a subject so characteristic and exciting; but somehow after that glimpse of his old love his mind would not stick to his theme. The two women clinging together, though one of them had a bonnet on, made a pretty "subject." He was not mediæval, to speak of, but rather classical in his tastes; yet it did strike him that a painter might have taken an idea for a Visitation out of that embrace. And so that was how Agatha Seton looked when she was an old woman! This idea fluttered in and out before his mind's eye, and threw such reflections upon his paper as came dreadfully in the way of his monograph. He lost his notes and forgot his researches in the bewilderment produced by it; for, to tell the truth, Agatha Seton was in a very much finer state of preservation, not to say fairer to look upon, than most of the existing monuments of Icelandic art.

"He has gone away," said Aunt Agatha, who was aware of that fact sooner than Mary was, though Mrs. Ochterlony's face was towards her brother-in-law; and she gave Mary a sudden hug and subsided into that good cry, which is such a relief and comfort to the mind; Mary's tears came too, but they were fewer and

not by any means so satisfactory as Aunt Agatha's, who was crying for nothing particular. "Oh, my dear love, don't think me a wretch," the old lady said. "I have never been able to get you out of my head, standing there on the platform all by yourself with the dear children; and I, like an old monster, taking offence and going away and leaving you! If it is any comfort to you, Mary, my darling, I have been wretched ever since. I tried to write, but I could not write. So now I've come to ask you to forgive me; and where are my dear, dear, darling boys?"

The poor little boys! Mary's heart gave a little leap to hear some one once more talk of those poor children as if they were not in the way. "Mr. Ochterlony is very kind," she said, not answering directly; "but we must not stay, Aunt Agatha, we cannot stay. He is not used to children, you know, and they worry him. Oh, if I had but any little place of my own!"

"You shall come to me, my darling love," said Aunt Agatha in triumph. "You should have come to me from the first. I am not saying anything against Francis Ochterlony. I never did; people might think he did not quite behave as was expected; but I am sure I never said a word against him. But how can a man understand? or what can you look for from them? My dearest Mary, you must come to me!"

"Thank you, Aunt Agatha," said Mary, doubtfully. "You are very kind — you are all very kind" — and then she repeated, under her breath, that longing aspiration, "Oh, that I had but any little place of my very own!"

"Yes, my love, that is what we must do," said Aunt Agatha. "I would take you with me if I could,

or I would take the dear boys with me. Nobody will be worried by them at the cottage. Oh, Mary, my darling, I never would say anything against poor dear Hugh, or encourage you to keep his relations at a distance; but just at this moment, my dear love, I did think it was most natural that you should go to your own friends."

"I think when one has little children one should be by one's-self," said Mary, "it is more natural. If I could get a little cottage near you, Aunt Agatha —"

"My love, mine is a little cottage," said Miss Seton; "it is not half nor quarter so big as Earlston — have you forgotten? and we are all a set of women together, and the dear boys will rule over us. Ah, Mary, you must come to me!" said the soft old lady. And after that she went up to the dim Earlston nursery, and kissed and hugged the tabooed children, whom it was the object of Mary's life to keep out of the way. But there was a struggle in Aunt Agatha's gentle bosom when she heard of the Etruscan vase and the rococo chair. Her heart yearned a little over the pretty things thus put in peril, for she had a few pretty things herself which were dear to her. Her alarm, however, was swallowed up by a stronger emotion. It was natural for a woman to take thought for such things, but it went to her heart to think of "poor Francis," once her hero, in such a connexion. "You see he has nothing else to care for," she said — and the fair old maiden paused and gave a furtive sigh over the poor old bachelor, who might have been so different. "It was his own fault," she added to herself, softly; but still the idea of Francis Ochterlony "wrapped up," as Miss Seton expressed it, in chairs and vases, gave a shock

to her gentle spirit. It was righteous retribution, but still Aunt Agatha was a woman, and pitiful. She was still more moved when Mary took her into the drawing-room, where there were so many beautiful things. She looked upon them with silent and reverent admiration, but still not without a personal reference. "So that is all he cares for, now-a-days," she said, with a sigh; and it was just at the same moment that Mr. Ochterlony, in his study, disturbed by visions of two women in his peaceable house, gave up his monograph on Icelandic art in despair.

This, it may be said, was how Mrs. Ochterlony's first experiment terminated. She did not leave Earlston at once, but she did so shortly after — without any particular resistance on the part of her brother-in-law. After Aunt Agatha's visit, Mr. Ochterlony's thoughts took a different turn. He was very civil to her before she left, as indeed it was his nature to be to all women, and showed her his collections, and paid her a certain alarmed and respectful deference. But after that he did not do anything to detain Mary in his house. Where one woman was, other women were pretty sure to come, and nobody could tell what unseen visitants might enter along with them, to disturb a man in his occupations, and startle him out of his tranquillity. He never had the heart to resume that monograph on Icelandic art — which was a great loss to the Society of Antiquaries and the æsthetic world in general; and though he had no advice in particular to give to his sister-in-law as to her future movements, he did not say anything further to deter her from leaving Earlston. "I hope you will let me know what your movements are, and where you decide upon settling,"

he said, as he shook hands with her very gravely at the carriage door, "and if I can be of any use." And this was how the first experiment came to an end.

Then Mrs. Ochterlony kissed her boys when they were fairly out of the grey shadow of their uncle's house, and shed a few tears over them. "Now at least I shall not have to keep my bonnie boys out of the way any more," said Mary. But she caught sight again of the cheery cottage, with the fire burning within, and the hospitable door open, as she drove down to the railway; and her heart longed to alight and take possession, and find herself at home. When should she be at home? or was there no such place left in the world? But happily she had no maid, and no time to think or calculate probabilities — and thus she set out upon her second venture, among "her own friends."

CHAPTER XIV.

Aunt Agatha's cottage was very different from Earlston. It was a woman's house, and bore that character written all over it. The Pysche and the Venus would have been dreadfully out of place in it, it is true, but yet there was not a spot left vacant where an ornament could be; little fanciful shelves nestled into all the corners — which it was a great comfort to Mary's mind to see were just above her boys' range — bearing little vases, and old teacups and curiosities of all kinds, not valuable like Francis Ochterlony's, nor chosen with such refined taste, but yet dear to Aunt Agatha's heart. Nothing so precious as the ware of

Henri II. had ever come in Miss Seton's way; but she had one or two trifling articles that were real Wedgewood, and she had some bits of genuine Sèvres, and a great deal of pretty rubbish, which answered the purpose quite as well as if it had been worth countless sums of money; and then there were flowers wherever flowers could find a place. The rooms all opened out with liberal windows upon the garden, and the doors stood open, and sun and air, sound and fragrance, went through and through the little house. It was the same house as that in which Mary had felt the English leaves rustling, and the English breezes blowing, as she read Aunt Agatha's letter in India, ages ago, before any of those great events had happened which had thrown such a shadow on her life. The two ladies of the cottage went to the railway to meet their visitors, and it was Peggy, the real head of the establishment, who stood in her best cap, in a flutter of black ribbons and white apron to receive "Miss Mary." And the glowing colour of the flowers, and the sunshine and the open house, and the flutter of womanish welcome, made the difference still more marked. When Mrs. Ochterlony was placed in the easiest chair in the brightest corner in that atmosphere of sunshine and sweetness, and saw her forlorn little boys take their place in the foreground of the picture, elected autocrats over the household in general, the sense of relief and difference was so sweet to her that she no longer felt that yearning for some place of her own. The greatest infidel, the most hard-hearted cynic could not have felt otherwise than at home under such circumstances. The children were taken out of Mary's hands on the instant, she whose time had been entirely devoted to keeping

them invisible and inaudible, and out of the way — and Peggy took possession of the baby, and pretty Winnie flashed away into the garden with the two boys, with floating curls and flying ribbons, and all the gay freedom of a country girl, taking the hearts of her little companions by storm. Her sister, who had not "taken to her" at first, sat in Aunt Agatha's chair, in the first moment of conscious repose she had known in England, and looked out at the fair young figure moving about among the flowers, and began to be in love with Winnie. Here she was safe at last, she and her fatherless children. Life might be over for her in its fullest sense — but still she was here at peace among her own people, and again some meaning seemed to come back to the word home. She was lingering upon this thought in the unusual repose of the moment, and wiping some quiet tears from her cheeks, when Aunt Agatha came and sat down beside her and took Mary's hand. She had been partially incoherent with satisfaction and delight until now, but by this time any little tendency to hysterics which might be in Aunt Agatha's nature, had been calmed down by the awe-inspiring presence of Peggy, and the comfort of perceiving nothing but satisfaction in that difficult woman's countenance. The baby had behaved himself like an angel, and had made no objections whatever to the cap or features of his new guardian; and Peggy, too, was visible from the open windows walking up and down the garden with little Wilfrid in her arms, in all the glory of content. This sight brought Miss Seton's comfort to a climax, as it did Mary's. She came and took her niece's hand, and sat down beside her with a tearful joy.

"Ah, Mary, this is what ought to have been from the very first," she said; "this is different from Francis Ochterlony and his dreary house. The dear children will be happy here."

"Yes, it is very different," said Mary, returning the pressure of the soft little white hand; but her heart was full, and she could not find much more to say.

"And you, too, my dear love," Aunt Agatha went on, who was not a wise woman, looking into the newcomer's face — "you, too, Mary, my darling — you will try to be happy in your old home? Well, dear, never mind answering me — I ought to know it is not the same for you as for us. I can't help feeling so happy to have you and the dear children. Look at Winnie, how delighted she is — she is so fond of children, though you would not think so just at first. Doesn't it make you feel the difference, Mary, to think you left her a baby, as one may say, and find her grown up into such a great girl?"

"I have so many things to make me feel the difference," said Mary — for Miss Seton was not one of those people who can do without an answer; and then Aunt Agatha was very sorry, and kissed her, with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, my love — yes, my dear love;" she said, as if she were soothing a child. "It was very foolish of me to use that expression; but you must try not to mind me, Mary. Cry, my dear, or don't answer me, or do just as you please. I never mean to say anything to recall —— Look at the dear boys, how delighted they are. I know they will be fond of Winnie — she has such a nice way with children. Don't you think she has a very nice way?"

"She is very handsome," said Mary, looking out wistfully upon the young imperious creature, whose stage of existence seemed the very antipodes of her own.

"My dear love, she is beautiful," said Aunt Agatha. "Sir Edward told me he had never, even at court — and you know he was a great deal about the court in his young days — seen any one that promised to be such a beautiful woman. And to think she should just be our Winnie all the same! And so simple and sweet — such a perfect child with it all! You may wonder how I have kept her so long," continued Winnie's adoring guardian, "when you were married, Mary, before you were her age."

Mrs. Ochterlony tried hard to look up with the look of inquiry and interest which was expected of her in Aunt Agatha's face; but she could not. It was difficult enough to struggle with the recollections that hung about this place, without having them thrust continually in her face in this affectionately heartless way. Thus the wheel turned softly round again, and the reality of the situation crept out in bare outline from under the cloak of flowers and tenderness, as hard and clear as at Earlston. Mary's grief was her own concern, and not of very much consequence to anybody else in the world. She had no right to forget that fact, and yet she did forget it, not being used yet to stand alone. While Aunt Agatha, on her side, could not but think it was rather hard-hearted of Mary to show so little interest in her own sister, and such a sister as Winnie.

"It is not because she is not appreciated," Miss Seton went on, feeling all the more bound to celebrate

her favourite's praises, "but I am so anxious she should make a good choice. She is not a girl that could marry anybody, you know. She has her own little ways, and such a great deal of character. I cannot tell you what a comfort it is to me, Mary, my dear love, to think that now we shall have your experience to guide us," Aunt Agatha added, melting into tenderness again.

"I am afraid experience is good for very little in such cases," said Mary, "but I hope there will be no guidance needed — she seems very happy now."

"To tell the truth, there is somebody at the Hall —" said Aunt Agatha, "and I want to have your opinion, my dear. Oh, Mary, you must not talk of no guidance being needed. I have watched over her ever since she was born. The wind has never blown roughly on her; and if my darling was to marry just an ordinary man, and be unhappy, perhaps — or no happier than the rest of us —" said Aunt Agatha, with a sigh. This last touch of nature went to Mary's heart.

"She is rich in having such love, whatever may happen to her," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "and she looks as if, after all, she might yet have the perfect life. She is very, very handsome — and good, I am sure, and sweet — or she would not be your child, Aunt Agatha; but we must not be too ready with our guidance. She would not be happy if her choice did not come spontaneously, and of itself."

"But oh, my dear love, the risk of marrying!" said Miss Seton, with a little sob — and she gave again a nervous pressure to Mary's hand, and did not restrain her tears. They sat thus in the twilight to-

gether, looking out upon the young living creatures for whom life was all brightly uncertain — one of them regarding with a pitiful flutter of dread and anxiety the world she had never ventured to enter into for herself. Perhaps a vision of Francis Ochterlony mingled with Miss Seton's thoughts, and a wistful backward glance at the life which might have been, but had not. The other sat very still, holding Aunt Agatha's soft little fluttering hand in her own, which was steady, and did not tremble, with a strange pang of anguish and pity in her heart. Mary looked at life through no such fanciful mists — she knew, as she thought, its deepest depth and profoundest calamity; but the fountain of her tears was all sealed up and closed, because nobody but herself had any longer anything to do with it. And she, too, yearned over the young creature whose existence was all to come, and felt that it was hard to think that she might be "no happier than the rest of us." It was these words which had arrested Mary, who, perhaps, might have otherwise thought that her own unquestionable sorrows demanded more sympathy than Winnie's problematical future. Thus the two elder ladies sat, until Winnie and the children came in, bringing life and commotion with them. The blackbird was still singing in the bushes, the soft northern twilight lingering, and the dew falling, and all the sweet evening odours coming in. As for Aunt Agatha, her heart, though it was old, fluttered with all the agitation and disturbance of a girl's — while Mary, in the calm and silence of her loneliness, felt herself put back as it were into history, along with Ruth and Rachel, and her own mother, and all the women whose lives had been and were over.

This was how it felt to her in the presence of Aunt Agatha's soft agitation — so that she half smiled at herself sitting there composed and tranquil, and soothing her companion into her usual calm.

"Mary agrees with me that this is better than Earlston, Winnie," said Aunt Agatha, when the children were all disposed of for the night, and the three who were so near to each other in blood, and who were henceforward to be close companions, yet who knew so little of each other in deed and truth, were left alone. The lamp was lighted, but the windows were still open, and the twilight still lingered, and a wistful blue-green sky looked in and put itself in swift comparison with the yellow lamplight. Winnie stood in one of the open windows, half in and half out, looking across the garden, as if expecting some one, and with a little contraction in her forehead that marred her fine profile slightly — giving a kind of careless half-attention to what was said.

"Does she?" she answered, indifferently; "I should have thought Earlston was a much handsomer house."

"It was not of handsome houses we were thinking, my darling," said Aunt Agatha, with soft reproof; "it was of love and welcome like what we are so glad as to give her here."

"Wasn't Mr. Ochterlony kind?" said Winnie, with half contempt. "Perhaps he does not fancy children. I don't wonder so very much at that. If they were not my own nephews, very likely I should think them dreadful little wretches. I suppose Mary won't mind me saying what I think. I always have been brought up to speak out."

"They are dear children," said poor Aunt Agatha,

promptly. "I wish you would come in, my love. It is a great deal too late now to go out."

And at that moment Mary, who was the spectator, and could observe what was going on, had her attention attracted by a little jar and rattle of the window at which Winnie was standing. It was the girl's impatient movement which had done it; and whether it was in obedience to Miss Seton's mild command, or something more urgent, Winnie came in instantly with a lowering brow, and shut the window with some noise and sharpness. Probably Aunt Agatha was used to it, for she took no notice; but even her patient spirit seemed moved to astonishment by the sudden clang of the shutters, which the hasty young woman began to close.

"Leave that to Peggy, my darling," she said; "besides, it was nice to have the air, and you know how I like the last of the gloaming. That is the window where one can always see poor Sir Edward's light when he is at home. I suppose they are sure to be at home, since they have not come here to-night."

"Shall I open the window again, and let you look at the light, since you like it so much?" said the undutiful Winnie. "I closed it for that. I don't like to have anybody staring down at us in that superior sort of way — as if we cared; and I am sure nobody here was looking for them to-night."

"No, my dear, of course not," said Miss Seton. "Sir Edward is far too much of a gentleman to think of coming the night that Mary was expected home."

And then Winnie involuntarily turned half-round, and darted upon Mary an inquiring defiant look out of her stormy eyes. The look seemed to say, "So it

was you who were the cause of it!" and then she swept past her sister with her streaming ribbons, and pulled out an embroidery frame which stood in a corner, and sat down to it in an irritated restless way. In that pretty room, in the soft evening atmosphere, beside the gentle old aunt, who was folding her soft hands in the sweet leisure that became her age, and the fair, mature, but saddened presence of the elder sister, who was resting in the calm of her exhaustion, a beautiful girl bending over an embroidery frame was just the last touch of perfection needed by the scene; but nobody would have thought so to see how Winnie threw herself down to her work, and dashed at it, all because of the innocent light that had been lighted in Sir Edward's window. Aunt Agatha did her best, by impressive looks and coughs, and little gestures, and transparently significant words, to subdue the spoilt child into good behaviour; and then, in despair, she thought herself called upon to explain.

"Sir Edward very often walks over of an evening," she said, edging herself as it were between Mary and her sister. "We are always glad to see him, you know. It is a little change; and then he has some nice young friends who stay with him occasionally," said the deceitful woman. "But to be sure, he has too much feeling to think of making his appearance on the night of your coming home."

"I hope you will make no difference for me," said Mary.

"My love, I hope I know what is proper," said Aunt Agatha, with her little air of decision. And once more Winnie gave her sister a defiant, accusing glance. "It is I that will be the sufferer, and it is all

on your account," this look said, and the beautiful profile marked itself out upon the wall with that contraction across the forehead which took away half its loveliness. And then an uncomfortable silence ensued. Mrs. Ochterlony could say nothing more in a matter of which she knew so little, and Aunt Agatha, though she was the most yielding of guardians, still came to a point of propriety now and then on which she would not give way. This was how Mary discovered that instead of the Arcadian calm and retirement of which the cottage seemed an ideal resting place, she had come into another little centre of agitated human life, where her presence made a jar and discord without any fault of hers.

But it would have been worse than ungrateful, it would have been heartless and unkind, to have expressed such a feeling. So she, who was the stranger, had to put force on herself, and talk and lead her two companions back, so far as that was possible, from their pre-occupation; but at the best it was an unsatisfactory and forced conversation, and Mrs. Ochterlony was but too glad to own herself tired, and to leave her aunt and sister to themselves. They had given her their best room, with the fresh chintz and the pictures. They had made every arrangement for her comfort that affection and thoughtful care could suggest. What they had not been able to do was to let her come into their life without disturbing it, without introducing forced restrictions and new rules, without, in short, making her, all innocently and unwittingly on both sides, the discord in the house. Thus Mary found that, without changing her position, she had simply changed the scene; and the thought made her heart sick.

When Mrs. Ochterlony had retired, the two ladies of the cottage said nothing to each other for some time. Winnie continued her work in the same restless way as she had begun and poor Aunt Agatha took up a book, which trembled in her hand. The impetuous girl had thrown open the window when she was reproved for closing it, and the light in Sir Edward's window shone far off on the tree tops, shedding an irritating influence upon Winnie when she looked up; and at the same time she could see the book shaking in Aunt Agatha's hand. Winnie was very fond of the guardian of her youth, and would have indignantly declared herself incapable of doing anything to vex her; but at the same time there could be no doubt that Aunt Agatha's nervousness gave a certain satisfaction to the young tyrant who ruled over her. Winnie saw that she was suffering, and could not help feeling pleased, for had not she too suffered all the evening? And she made no attempt to speak, or to take any initiative, so that it was only after Miss Seton had borne it as long as she was capable of bearing it, that the silence was broken at last.

"Dear Winnie," said Aunt Agatha, with a faltering voice, "I think, when you think of it, that you will not think you have been quite considerate in making poor Mary uncomfortable the first night."

"Mary feel uncomfortable?" cried Winnie. "Good gracious, Aunt Agatha, is one never to hear of anything but Mary? What has anybody done? I have been sitting working all the evening, like — like a dressmaker or poor needlewoman; does she object to that, I wonder?" and the young rebel put her frame back into its corner, and rose to the fray. Sir Edward's

window still threw its distant light over the tree tops, and the sight of it made her smouldering passion blaze.

"Oh, my dear, you know that was not what I meant," said the disturbed and agitated aunt.

"I wish then, please, you would say what you mean," said Winnie. "She would not come with us at first, when we were all ready for her, and then she would not stay at Earlston after going there of her own will. I dare say she made Mr. Ochterlony's life wretched with her trouble and widow's cap. Why didn't she be burnt with her Major, and be done with it?" said Winnie. "I am sure it would be by far the most comfortable way."

"Oh, Winnie, I thought you would have had a little sympathy for your sister," said Aunt Agatha, with tears.

"Everybody has sympathy for my sister," said Winnie, "from Peggy up to Sir Edward. I don't see why she should have it all. Hasn't she had her day? Nobody came in upon her, when she was my age, to put the house in mourning, and banish all one's friends. I hate injustice," cried the young revolutionary. "It is the injustice that makes me angry. I tell you, Aunt Agatha, she has had her day."

"Oh, Winnie," cried Miss Seton, weeping — "Oh, my darling child! don't be so hard upon poor Mary. When she was your age she had not half nor quarter the pleasures you have; and it was I that said she ought to come among her own friends."

"I am sure she would be a great deal better in some place of her own," said Winnie, with a little violence. "I wonder how she can go to other people's houses with all that lot of little children. If I should

ever come home a widow from India, or anywhere else —"

"Winnie!" cried Aunt Agatha, with a little scream, "for Heaven's sake, don't say such things. Sorrow comes soon enough, without going to meet it; and if we can give her a little repose, poor dear — And what do a few pleasant evenings signify to you at your time of life?"

"A few pleasant evenings!" said Winnie; and she gave a kind of gasp, and threw herself into a chair, and cried too, for passion, and vexation, and disgust — perhaps, a little, too, out of self-disgust, though she would not acknowledge it. "As if that were all! And nobody thinks how the days are flying, and how it may all come to an end!" cried the passionate girl. After having given vent to such words, shame and remorse seized upon Winnie. Her cheeks blazed so that the scorching heat dried up her tears, and she sprang up again and flew at the shutters, on which her feelings had already expended themselves more than once, and brought down the bar with a clang that startled the whole house. As for Aunt Agatha, she sat aghast, and gazed, and could not believe her eyes or her ears. What were the days that were flying, or the things that might come to an end? Could this wild exclamation have anything to do with the fact that Captain Percival was only on a visit at the Hall, and that his days were, so to speak, numbered? Miss Seton was not so old as to have forgotten what it was to be thus on the eve of losing sight of some one who had, as she would herself have said, "interested you." But Aunt Agatha had never in her life been guilty of violence or passion, and the idea of committing such a

sin against all propriety and good taste as to have her usual visitors while the family was in affliction, was something which she could not take into her mind. It looked a breach of morals to Miss Seton; and for the moment it actually seemed as if Winnie, for the first time in her life, was not to have her way.

CHAPTER XV.

"EVERYBODY has sympathy with my sister," was what Winnie had said; and perhaps that was the hardest thing of all to bear. She was like the respectable son who came in disgusted into the midst of a merry-making all consecrated to the return of his disreputable prodigal brother. What did the fellow mean by coming home? Why did not he stay where he was, and fill his belly with the husks? If Mary had but been left to her young sister's sympathy, Winnie would (or thought she would) have lavished tenderness upon her. But the fact was, that it was very very hard to think how the days were passing by, and how perhaps all the precious evenings which remained might be cut off for ever, and its fairest prospect taken from her life, by Aunt Agatha's complaisance to Mary. It was true that it was Captain Percival's visit that Winnie was thinking of. Perhaps it was a little unmaidenly of her to own as much even to herself. It was a thing which Aunt Agatha would have died sooner than do, and which even Mary could not have been guilty of; but then girls now are brought up so differently. He might find himself shut out from

the house, and might think the "family affliction" only a pretence, and might go away and make an end of it for ever — and Winnie was self-willed and passionate, and felt she must move heaven and earth sooner than let this be so. It seemed to her as if the happiness of her life hung upon it, and she could not but think, being young and fond of poetry, of the many instances in books in which the magical moment was thus lost, and two lives made miserable. And how could it harm Mary to see a strange face or two about; she who had had the fortitude to come home all the way from India, and had survived, and was in sufficiently good health after her grief, which of itself was a thing for which the critic of eighteen was disposed to despise a woman?

As she brooded over this at night in her own room with the window open, and her long hair streaming over her shoulders like a romantic heroine, and the young moonlight whitening over the trees, turrets, and windows of the Hall, a wild impatience of all the restrictions which were at that moment pressing upon her came upon Winnie. She had been very bright and pleasant with the little boys in the garden; which was partly because her heart melted towards the helpless children who were her own flesh and blood, and partly because at that time nothing had occurred to thwart or vex her; but from the moment when she had seen Sir Edward's window suddenly gleam into the twilight matters had changed. Then Winnie had perceived that the event which had been the central point of her daily life for some time back, the visit of Sir Edward and his "young friend," was not going to happen. It was the first time it had occurred to her that Mary's

duty, and at least there was, or ought to be, a certain comfort in that.

Sir Edward came next day to pay a solemn visit at the cottage, and it gave her a momentary gleam of comfort to feel that this was the course of conduct which he at least expected of her. He came, and his "young friend" came with him, and for the moment smiles and contentment came back to the household. Sir Edward entered the drawing-room and shook hands tenderly with Mrs. Ochterlony, and sat down beside her, and began to talk as only an old friend could; but the young friend stayed in the garden with Winnie, and the sound of their voices came in now and then along with the songs of the birds and the fragrance of the flowers — all nature conspiring as usual to throw a charm about the young creatures, who apart from this charm did not make the loveliest feature in the social landscape. Sir Edward, on the other hand, sat down as a man sits down in a room where there is a seat which is known as his, and where he is in the way of doing a great deal of pleasant talk most days of his life. This was a special occasion, and he behaved himself accordingly. He patted Mary's hand softly with one of his, and held it in the other, and looked at her with that tender curiosity and inquiry which comes natural after a long absence. "She is changed, but I can see our old Mary still in her face," said the old man, patting her hand; and then he asked about the journey, and if he should see the children; and then the ordinary talk began.

"We did not come last evening, knowing you expected Mary," Sir Edward said, "and a most unpleasant companion I had all the night in consequence.

Young people will be young people, you know — indeed, I never can help remembering, that just the other day I was young myself."

"Yes," said Aunt Agatha, faltering; "but you see under the circumstances, Sir Edward, Winnie could not expect that her sister——"

"Dear aunt," said Mary, "I have already begged you to make no difference for me."

"I am sure, my love, you are very kind," said Aunt Agatha; "you always were the most unselfish — But I hope I know my duty, whatever your good heart may induce you to say."

"And *I* hope, after a while," said Sir Edward, "that Mary too will be pleased to see her friends. We are all friends here, and everybody I know will be glad to welcome her home."

Most likely it was those very words that made Mary feel faint and ill, and unable to reply. But though she did not say anything, she at least made no sort of objection to the hope; and immediately the pleasant little stream of talk gushed up and ran past her as she knew it would. The two old people talked of the two young ones who were so interesting to them, and all that was special in Sir Edward's visit came to a close.

"Young Percival is to leave me next week," Sir Edward said. "I shall miss him sadly, and I am afraid it will cost him a heartache to go."

Aunt Agatha knew so well what her friend meant that she felt herself called upon to look as if she did not know. "Ah," she said, "I don't wonder. It is not often that he will find such a friend as you have been,

Sir Edward: and to leave you, who are always such pleasant company ——"

"My dear Miss Seton," said Sir Edward, with a gentle laugh, "you don't suppose that I expect him to have a heartache for love of me? He is a nice young fellow, and I am sorry to lose him; but if it were only *my* pleasant company ——"

Then Aunt Agatha blushed as if it had been herself who was young Percival's attraction. "We shall all miss him, I am sure," she said. "He is so delicate and considerate. He has not come in, thinking no doubt that Mary is not equal to seeing strangers; but I am so anxious that Mary should see him — that is, I like her to know our friends," said the imprudent woman, correcting herself, and once more blushing crimson, as if young Percival had been a lover of her very own.

"He is a very nice fellow," said Sir Edward; "most people like him; but I don't know that I should have thought of describing him as considerate or delicate. Mary must not form too high an idea. He is just a young man like other young men," said the impartial baronet, and likes his own way, and is not without a proper regard for his own interest. He is not in the least a hero of romance."

"I don't think he is at all mercenary, Sir Edward, if that is what you mean," said Aunt Agatha, blushing no longer, but growing seriously red.

"Mercenary!" said Sir Edward. "I don't think I ever dreamt of that. He is like other young men, you know. I don't want Mary to form too high an idea. But one thing I am sure of is that he is very sorry to go away."

And then a little pause happened, which was trying to Aunt Agatha, and in the interval the voices of the two young people in the garden sounded pleasantly from outside. Sitting thus within hearing of them, it was difficult to turn to any other subject; but yet Miss Seton would not confess that she could by any possibility understand what her old neighbour meant; and by way of escaping from that embarrassment plunged without thought into another in which she floundered helplessly after the first dash.

"Mary has just come from Earlston," she said. "It has grown quite a museum, do you know? — every sort of beautiful thing, and all so nicely arranged. Francis — Mr. Ochterlony," said Aunt Agatha, in confusion, "had always a great deal of taste —— Perhaps you may remember ——"

"Oh, yes, I remember," said Sir Edward — "such things are not easily forgotten — but I hope you don't mean to suppose that Percival ——"

"I was thinking nothing about Captain Percival," Miss Seton said, feeling ready to cry — "What I meant was, I thought — I supposed you might have some interest — I thought you might like to know ——"

"Oh, if that is all," said Sir Edward, "of course I take a great interest — but I thought you meant something of the same kind might be going on here. You must never think of that. I would never forgive myself if I were twice to be the occasion ——"

"I was thinking nothing about Captain Percival," said Aunt Agatha, with tears of vexation in her eyes; "nor — nor anything else — I was talking for the sake of conversation: I was thinking perhaps you might like to hear ——"

"May I show you my boys, Sir Edward?" said Mary, ringing the bell — "I should like you to see them; and I am going to ask you, by-and-by, what I must do with them. My brother-in-law is very much a recluse — I should be glad to have the advice of somebody who knows more of the world."

"Ah, yes, let us see the boys," said Sir Edward. "*All* boys are they? — that's a pity. You shall have the best advice I can give you, my dear Mary — and if you are not satisfied with that, you shall have better advice than mine; there is nothing so important as education; come along, little ones. So these are all? — three — I thought you had more than three. Ah, I beg your pardon. How do you do, my little man? I am your mamma's old friend — I knew her long before you were born — come and tell me your name."

And while Sir Edward got at these particulars, and took the baby on his knee, and made himself agreeable to the two sturdy little heroes who stood by, and stared at him, Aunt Agatha came round behind backs, and gave Mary a quiet kiss — half by way of consolation, half by way of thanks — for, but for that happy inspiration of sending for the children, there was no telling what bog of unfortunate talk Miss Seton might not have tumbled into. Sir Edward was one of those men who know much, too much, about everybody — everything, he himself thought. He could detect allusions in the most careless conversation, and never forgot anything even when it was expedient and better that it should be forgotten. He was a man who had been unlucky in his youth, and who now, in his old age, though he was as well off as a man living all alone, in forlorn celibacy, could be, was always called

poor Sir Edward. The very cottagers called him so, who might well have looked upon his life as a kind of paradise; and being thus recognised as an object of pity, Sir Edward had on the whole a very pleasant life. He knew all about everybody, and was apt at times to confuse his neighbours sadly, as he had just done Aunt Agatha, by a reference to the most private bits of their individual history; but it was never done with ill-nature — and after all there is a charm about a person who knows everything about everybody. He was a man who could have told you all about the Gretna Green marriage, which had cost poor Major Ochterlony so much trouble, as well, or perhaps even better, than if he had been present at it; and he was favourable to marriages in general, though he had never himself made the experience, and rather liked to preside over a budding inclination like that between Winifred Seton and young Percival. He took little Wilfrid on his knee when the children were thus brought upon the scene, in a fatherly, almost grandfatherly way, and was quite ready to go into Mary's plans about them. He thought it was quite right, and the most suitable thing she could do, to settle somewhere where there was a good grammar-school; and he had already begun to calculate where the best grammar-schools were situated, and which would be the best plan for Mrs. Ochterlony, when the voices in the garden were heard approaching. Aunt Agatha had escaped from her embarrassment by going out to the young people, and was now bringing them in to present the young man for Mary's approval and criticism. Miss Seton came first, and there was anxiety in her face and after her Winnie stepped in at the window, with;

a little flush upon her pretty cheek, and an unusual light in her eye; and after her — but at that moment the whole party were startled by a sudden sound of surprise, the momentary falling back of the stranger's foot from the step, and a surprised, half-suppressed exclamation. "Oh! — Mrs. Ochterlony!" exclaimed Sir Edward's young friend. As it happened all the rest were silent at that moment, and his voice was distinctly audible, though perhaps he had not meant it to be so. He himself was half hidden by the roses which clambered all over the cottage, but Mary naturally turned round, and turned her face to the window, when she heard her own name — as indeed they all did — surprised at the exclamation, and still more at the tone. And it was thus under the steady gaze of four pairs of eyes that Captain Percival came into the room. Perhaps but for that exclamation Mary might not have recognised him; but her ear had been trained to quick understanding of that inflection, half of amusement, half of contempt, which she had not heard for so long. To her ears it meant, "Oh, Mrs. Ochterlony! — she who was married over again, as people pretended — she who took in the Kirkmans, and all the people at the station." Captain Percival came in, and he felt his blood run cold as he met all those astonished eyes, and found Mary looking so intently at him. What had he done that they should all stare at him like that? for he was not so well aware of what he had given utterance to, nor of his tone in giving utterance to it, as they were. "Good heavens, what is the matter?" he said; "you all look at me as if I were a monster. Miss Seton, may I ask you to introduce me ——"

"We have met before, I think," Mary said, quietly. "When I heard of Captain Percival I did not know it was the same I used to hear so much about in India. I think, when I saw you last, it was at——"

She wanted by sudden instinct to say it out and set herself right for ever and ever, here where everything about her was known; but the words seemed to choke her. In spite of herself she stopped short; how could she refer to that, the only great grievance in her life, her husband's one great wrong against her, now that he was in his grave, and she left in the world the defender and champion of all his acts and ways? She could not do it — she was obliged to stop short in the middle, and swallow the sob that would have choked her with the next word. And they stood all gazing at her, wondering what it was.

"Yes," said the young man, with a confidential air — "I remember it very well indeed — I heard all about it from Askell, you know; — but I never imagined, when I heard you talking of your sister, that it was the same Mrs. Ochterlony," he added, turning to Winnie, who was looking on with great and sudden interest. And then there was a pause — such a pause as occurs sometimes when there is an evident want of explanation somewhere, and all present feel that they are on the borders of a mystery. Somehow it changed the character of the assembled company. A few minutes before it had been the sad stranger, in her widow's cap, who was the centre of all, whom all present paid, willingly or not, a certain homage to, and to whom the visitors had to be presented in a half apologetic way, as if to a queen. Aunt Agatha, indeed, had been quite anxious on the subject, pondering

how she could best bring Sir Edward's young friend, Winnie's admirer, under Mrs. Ochterlony's observation, and have her opinion of him; and now in an instant the situation was reversed, and it was Mary and Captain Percival alone who seem to know each other, and to have recollections in common! Mary felt her cheeks flush in spite of herself, and Winnie grew pale with incipient jealousy and dismay, and Aunt Agatha fluttered about in a state of the wildest anxiety. At last both she and Sir Edward burst out talking at the same moment, with the same visible impulse. And they brought the children into the foreground, and lured them into the utterance of much baby nonsense, and even went so far as to foster a rising quarrel between Hugh and Islay, all to cover up from each other's eyes and smother in the bud this mystery, if it was a mystery. It was a singular disturbance to bring into such a quiet house; for how could the people who dwelt at home tell what those two strangers might have known about each other in India, how they might have been connected, or what secret might lie between them? — no more than people could tell in a cosy sheltered curtained room what might be going on at sea, or even on the dark road outside. And here there was the same sense of insecurity — the same distrust and fear. Winnie stood a little apart, pale, and with her delicate curved nostril a little dilated. Captain Percival was younger than Mary, and Mary up to this moment had been hedged round with a certain sanctity, even in the eyes of her discontented young sister. But there was some intelligence between them, something known to those two which was known to no one else in the party. This was enough to set off the thoughts of a

self-willed girl, upon whose path Mary had thrown the first shadow, wildly into all kinds of suspicions. And to tell the truth, the elder people, who should have known better, were not much wiser than Winnie. Thus, while Hugh and Islay had a momentary struggle in the foreground, which called for their mother's active interference, the one ominous cloud of her existence once more floated up upon the dim firmament over Mary's head; though if she had but finished her sentence it would have been no cloud at all, and might never have come to anything there or thereafter. But this did not occur to Mrs. Ochterlony. What did occur to her in her vexation and pain was that her dead Hugh would be hardly dealt with among her kindred, if the stranger should tell her story. And she was glad, heartily glad, that there was little conversation afterwards, and that very soon the two visitors went away. But it was she who was the last to be aware that a certain doubt, a new and painful element of uncertainty stayed behind them in Aunt Agatha's pretty cottage after they were gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

THAT night was a painful night for Winnie. The girl was self-willed and self-loving, as has been said. But she was not incapable of the more generous emotions, and when she looked at her sister she could no more suspect her of any wrong or treachery than she could suspect the sun shining over their heads. And her interest in the young soldier had gone a great length. She thought he loved her, and it was very

hard to think that he was kept apart from her by a reason which was no reason at all. She roved about the garden all the evening in an unsettled way, thinking he would come again — thinking he could not stay away — explaining to herself that he must come to explain. And when she glanced indoors at the lamp which was lighted so much earlier than it needed to be, for the sake of Mary's sewing, and saw Mary seated beside it, in what looked like perfect composure and quietness, Winnie's impatience got the better of her. He was to be banished, or confined to a formal morning call, for Mary's sake, who sat there so calm, a woman for whom the fret and cares of life were over, while for Winnie life was only beginning, and her heart going out eagerly to welcome and lay claim to its troubles. And then the thought that it was the same Mrs. Ochterlony came sharp as a sting to Winnie's heart. What could he have had to do with Mrs. Ochterlony? what did *she* mean coming home in the character of a sorrowful widow, and shutting out their visitors, and yet awakening something like agitation and unquestionable recognition in the first stranger she saw? Winnie wandered through the garden, asking herself those questions, while the sweet twilight darkened, and the magical hour passed by, which had of late associated itself with so many dreams. And again he did not come. It was impossible to her, when she looked at Mary, to believe that there could be anything inexplainable in the link which connected her lover with her sister — but still he ought to have come to explain. And when Sir Edward's windows were lighted once more, and the certainty that he was not coming penetrated her mind,

Winnie clenched her pretty hands, and went crazy for the moment with despite and vexation. Another long dull weary evening, with all the expectation and hope quenched out of it; another lingering night; another day in which there was as much doubt as hope. And next week he was going away! And it was all Mary's fault, however you took it — whether she had known more of him than she would allow in India, or whether it was simply the fault of that widow's cap which scared people away? This was what was going on in Winnie's agitated mind while the evening dews fell upon the banks of Kirtell, and the soft stars came out, and the young moon rose, and everything glistened and shone with the sweetness of a summer night. This fair young creature, who was in herself the most beautiful climax of all the beauty around her, wandered among her flowers with her small hands clenched, and the spirit of a little fury in her heart. She had nothing in the world to trouble her, and yet she was very unhappy, and it was all Mary's fault. Probably if Mary could but have seen into Winnie's heart she would have thought it preferable to stay at Earlston, where the Psyche and the Venus were highly indifferent, and had no hearts, but only arms and noses that could be broken. Winnie was more fragile than the Etruscan vases or the Henri II. porcelain. They had escaped fracture, but she had not; but fortunately this thought did not occur to Mrs. Ochterlony as she sat by the lamp working at Hugh's little blouses in Aunt Agatha's chair.

And Aunt Agatha, more actively jealous than Winnie herself, sat by knitting little socks — an occupation which she had devoted herself to, heart and soul,

from the moment when she first knew the little Ochterlonys were coming home. She was knitting with the prettiest yarn and the finest needles, and had a model before her of proportions so shapely as to have filled any woman's soul with delight; but all that was eclipsed for the time by the doubt which hung over Mary, and the evident unhappiness of her favourite. Aunt Agatha was less wise than Winnie, and had not eyes to perceive that people were characteristic even in their wrong-doing, and that Captain Percival of himself could have nothing to do with the shock which Mary had evidently felt at the sight of him. Probably Miss Setòn had not been above a little flirtation in her own day, and she did not see how that would come unnatural to a woman of her own flesh and blood. And she sat accordingly on the other side of the lamp and knitted, with a pucker of anxiety upon her fair old brow, casting wistful glances now and then into the garden where Winnie was.

"And I suppose, my dear, you know Captain Percival very well?" said Aunt Agatha, with that anxious look on her face.

"I don't think I ever saw him but once," said Mary, who was a little impatient of the question.

"But once, my dear love! and yet you both were so surprised to meet," said Aunt Agatha, with reasonable surprise.

"There are some moments when to see a man is to remember him ever after," said Mary. "It was at such a time that I saw Sir Edward's friend. It would be best to tell you about it, Aunt Agatha. There was a time when my poor Hugh ——"

"Oh, Mary, my darling, you can't think I want to

vex you," cried Aunt Agatha, "or make you go back again upon anything that is painful. I am quite satisfied, for my part, when you say so. And so would Winnie be, I am sure."

"Satisfied?" said Mary, wondering, and yet with a smile; and then she forgot the wonder of it in the anxiety. "I should be sorry to think that Winnie cared much for anything that could be said about Captain Percival. I used to hear of him from the Askells who were friends of his. Do not let her have anything to do with him, Aunt Agatha; I am sure he could bring her nothing but disappointment and pain."

"I — Mary? — Oh, my dear love, what can *I* do?" cried Miss Seton, in sudden confusion; and then she paused and recovered herself. "Of course if he was a wicked young man, I — I would not let Winnie have anything to do with him," she added, faltering; "but — do you think you are sure, Mary? If it should be only that you do not — like him; or that you have not got on — or something ——"

"I have told you that I know nothing of him, Aunt," said Mary. "I saw him once at the most painful moment of my life, and spoke half-a-dozen words to him in my own house after that — but it is what I have heard the gentlemen say. I do not like him. I think it was unmannerly and indelicate to come to my house at such a time ——"

"My darling!" said Aunt Agatha, soothing her tenderly. Miss Seton was thinking of the major's death, not of any pain that might have gone before; and Mary by this time in the throng of recollections

that came upon her had forgotten that everybody did not know.

"But that is not the reason," Mrs. Ochterlony said, composing herself: "the reason is that he could not, unless he is greatly changed, make Winnie otherwise than unhappy. I know the reputation he had. The Hesketh would not let him come to their house after Annie came out; and I have even heard Hugh ——"

"My dear love, you are agitating yourself," cried Aunt Agatha. "Oh, Mary, if you only knew how anxious I am to do anything to recall ——"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with a faint smile: "it is not so far off that I should require anything to recall all that has happened to me — but for Winnie's sake ——"

And it was just at that monent that the light suddenly appeared in Sir Edward's window, and brought Winnie in, white and passionate, with a thunder-cloud full of tears and lightnings and miserable headache and self-reproach, lowering over her brilliant eyes.

"It is very good of Mary, I am sure, to think of something for my sake," said Winnie. "What is it, Aunt Agatha? Everything is always so unpleasant that is for one's good. I should like to know what it was."

And then there was a dead silence in the pretty room. Mary bent her head over her work, silenced by the question, and Aunt Agatha, in a flutter of uncertainty and tribulation, turned from one to the other, not knowing which side to take nor what to say.

"Mary has come among us a stranger," said Winnie, "and I suppose it is natural that she should think she knows our business better than we do. I suppose that is always how it seems to a stranger; but at the same time it is a mistake, Aunt Agatha, and I wish you would let Mary know that we are disposed to manage for ourselves. If we come to any harm it is we who will have to suffer, and not Mary," the impetuous girl cried, as she drew that unhappy embroidery frame out of its corner.

And then another pause, severe and startling, fell upon the little party. Aunt Agatha fluttered in her chair, looking from one to another, and Winnie dragged a violent needle through her canvas, and a great night moth came in and circled about them, and dashed itself madly against the globe of light on the table. As for Mary, she sat working at Hugh's little blouse, and for a long time did not speak.

"My dear love!" Aunt Agatha said at last, trembling, "you know there is nothing in the world I would not do to please you, Winnie, — nor Mary either. Oh, my dear children, there are only you two in the world. If one says anything, it is for the other's good. And here we are, three women together, and we are all fond of each other, and surely, surely, nothing ever can make any unpleasantness!" cried the poor lady, with tears. She had her heart rent in two, like every mediatrix, and yet the larger half, as was natural, went to her darling's side.

"Winnie is right enough," Mary said, quietly. "I am a stranger, and I have no right to interfere; and very likely, even if I were permitted to interfere, it would do no good. It is a shame to vex you, Aunt

Agatha. My sister must submit to hear my opinion one time, but I am not going to disturb the peace of the house, nor yours."

"Oh, Mary, my dear, it is only that she is a little impatient, and has always had her own way," said Aunt Agatha, whispering across the table. And then no more was said. Miss Seton took up her little socks, and Winnie continued to labour hotly at her embroidery, and the sound of her work, and the rustle of Mary's arm at her sewing, and the little click of Aunt Agatha's knitting-needles, and the mad dashes of the moth at the lamp, were all the sounds in the room, except, indeed, the sound of the Kirtell, flowing softly over its pebbles at the foot of the brae, and the sighing of the evening air among the trees, which were sadly contradictory of the spirit of the scene within; and at a distance over the woods, gleamed Sir Edward's window, with the ill-disposed light which was, so to speak, the cause of all. Perhaps, after all, if Mrs. Ochterlony had stayed at Earlston, where the Psyche and the Venus were not sensitive, and there was nothing but marble and china to jar into discord, it might have been better; and what would have been better still, was the grey cottage on the roadside, with fire on the hearth and peace and freedom in the house; and it was to that, with a deep and settled longing, that Mary's heart and thoughts went always back.

When Mrs. Ochterlony had withdrawn, the scene changed much in Aunt Agatha's drawing-room. But it was still a pretty scene. Then Winnie came and poured out her girlish passion in the ears and at the feet of her tender guardian. She sank down upon the carpet, and laid her beautiful head upon Aunt Agatha's

knee, and clasped her slender arms around her. "To think she should come and drive every one I care for away from the house, and set even you against me!" cried Winnie, with sobs of vexation and rage.

"Oh, Winnie! not me! Never me, my darling," cried Aunt Agatha; and they made a group which a painter would have loved, and which would have conveyed the most delicate conception of love and grief to an admiring public, had it been painted. Nothing less than a broken heart and a blighted life would have been suggested to any innocent fancy by the abandonment of misery in Winnie's attitude. And to tell the truth, she was very unhappy, furious with Mary, and with herself, and with her lover, and everybody in the wide world. The braids of her beautiful hair got loose, and the net that confined them came off, and the glistening silken flood came tumbling about her shoulders. Miss Seton could not but take great handfuls of it as she tried to soothe her darling; and poor Aunt Agatha's heart was rent in twain as she sat with this lovely burden in her lap, thinking, Oh, if nobody had ever come to distract Winnie's heart with love-making, and bring such disturbance to her life; oh, if Hugh Ochterlony had thought better of it, and had not died! Oh, if Mary had never seen Captain Percival, or seeing him, had approved of him, and thought him of all others the mate she would choose for her sister! The reverse of all these wishes had happened, and Aunt Agatha could not but look at the combination with a certain despair.

"What can I do, my dear love?" she said. "It is my fault that Mary has come here. You know yourself it would have been unnatural if she had gone any-

where else: and how could we go on having people, with her in such deep mourning? And as for Captain Percival, my darling —"

"I was not speaking of Captain Percival," said Winnie, with indignation. "What is he to me? — or any man? But what I will not bear is Mary interfering. She shall not tell us what we are to do. She shan't come in and look as if she understood everything better than we do. And, Aunt Agatha, she shan't — she shall never come, not for a moment, between you and me!"

"My darling child! my dear love!" cried poor Aunt Agatha, "as if that was possible, or as if poor Mary wanted to. Oh, if you would only do her justice, Winnie? She is fond of you; I know she is fond of you. And what she was saying was entirely for your good —"

"She is fond of nobody but her children," said Winnie, rising up, and gathering her bright hair back into the net. "She would not care what happened to us, as long as all was well with her tiresome little boys."

Aunt Agatha wrung her hands, as she looked in despair at the tears on the flushed cheek, and the cloud which still hung upon her child's brow. What could she say? Perhaps there was a little truth in what Winnie said. The little boys, though Miss Seton could not help feeling them to be so unimportant in comparison with Winnie and her beginning of life, were all in all to Mrs. Ochterlony; and when she had murmured again that Mary meant it all for Winnie's good, and again been met by a scornful protestation that anything meant for one's good was highly unpleasant,

Aunt Agatha was silenced, and had not another word to say. All that she could do was to pet her wilful darling more than ever, and to promise with tears that Mary should never, never make any difference between them, and that she herself would do anything that Winnie wished or wanted. The interview left her in such a state of agitation that she could not sleep, nor even lie down, till morning was breaking, and the new day had begun — but wandered about in her dressing-gown, thinking she heard Winnie move, and making pilgrimages to her room to find her, notwithstanding all her passion and tears, as fast asleep as one of Mary's boys — which was very, very different from Aunt Agatha's case, or Mary's either, for that matter. As for Mrs. Ochterlony, it is useless to enter into any description of her feelings. She went to bed with a heavy heart, feeling that she had made another failure, and glad, as people are when they have little comfort round them, of the kind night and the possible sleep which, for a few hours at least, would make her free of all this. But she did not sleep as Winnie did, who felt herself so ill-used and injured. Thus, Mrs. Ochterlony's return, a widow, brought more painful agitation to Miss Seton's cottage than had been known under its quiet roof since the time when she went away a bride.

CHAPTER XVII.

And after this neither Sir Edward nor his young friend appeared for two whole days. Any girl of Winifred Seton's impetuous character, who has ever been left in such a position on the very eve of the telling of that love-tale, which had been all but told for several weeks past, but now seemed suddenly and artificially arrested just at the moment of utterance — will be able to form some idea of Winnie's feelings during this dreadful interval. She heard the latch of the gate lifted a hundred times in the day, when, alas, there was no one near to lift the latch. She was afraid to go out for an instant, lest in that instant "they" should come; her brain was ringing with supposed sounds of footsteps and echoes of voices, and yet the road lay horribly calm and silent behind the garden hedge, with no passengers upon it. And these two evenings the light came early into Sir Edward's window, and glared cruelly over the trees. And to be turned inward upon the sweet old life from which the charm had fled, and to have to content one's self with flowers and embroidery, and the canary singing, and the piano, and Aunt Agatha! Many another girl has passed through the same interval of torture, and felt the suspense to be killing, and the crisis tragic — but yet to older eyes perhaps even such a dread suspension of all the laws of being has also its comic side. Winnie, however, took care to keep anybody from laughing at it in the cottage. It was life and death to her, or at

least so she thought. And her suppressed frenzy of anxiety, and doubt, and fear, were deep earnest to Aunt Agatha, who seemed now to be living her own early disappointments over again, and more bitterly than in the first version of them. She tried hard to remember the doubt thrown upon Captain Percival by Mary, and to persuade herself that this interposition was providential, and meant to save her child from an unhappy marriage. But when Miss Seton saw Winnie's tragic countenance, her belief in Providence was shaken. She could not see the good of anything that made her darling suffer. Mary might be wrong, she might be prejudiced, or have heard a false account, and it might be simply herself who was to blame for shutting her doors, or seeming to shut her doors, against her nearest and oldest neighbours. Could it be supposed that Sir Edward would bring any one to her house who was not a fit associate or a fit suitor, if things should take such a turn, for Winnie? Under the painful light thrown upon the subject by Winnie's looks, Aunt Agatha came altogether to ignore that providential view which had comforted her at first, and was so far driven in the other direction at last as to write Sir Edward a little note, and take the responsibility upon her own shoulders. What Miss Seton wrote was, that though, in consequence of their late affliction, the family were not equal to seeing visitors in a general way, yet that it would be strange indeed if they were to consider Sir Edward a stranger, and that she hoped he would not stay away, as she was sure his company would be more a comfort to Mary than anything else. And she also hoped Captain Percival would not leave the Hall without coming to see

them. It was such a note as a maiden lady was fully justified in writing to an old friend — an invitation, but yet given with a full consideration of all the proprieties, and that tender regard for Mary's feelings which Aunt Agatha had shown throughout. It was written and despatched when Winnie had gone out, as she did on the third day, in proud defiance and desperation, so that if Sir Edward's sense of propriety and respect for Mary's cap should happen to be stronger than Aunt Agatha's, no further vexation might come to the young sufferer from this attempt to set all right.

And Winnie went out without knowing of this effort for her consolation. She went down by Kirtell, winding down the wooded banks, in the sweet light and shade of the August morning, seeing nothing of the brightness, wrapped up and absorbed in her own sensations. She felt now that the moment of fate had passed, — that moment that made or marred two lives; — and had in her heart, in an embryo unexpressed condition, several of Mr. Browning's minor poems, which were not then written; and felt a general bitterness against the world for the lost climax, the *dénouement* which had not come. She thought to herself even, that if the tale had been told, the explanation made, and something, however tragical, had happened *after*, it would not have been so hard to bear. But now it was clear to Winnie that her existence must run on soured and contracted in the shade, and that young Percival must stiffen into a worldly and miserable old bachelor, and that their joint life, the only life worth living, had been stolen from them, and blighted in the bud. And what was it all for? — because Mary, who had had all the good things of this life, who had loved

and been married in the most romantic way, and had been adored by her husband, and reigned over him, had come, so far, to an end of her career. Mary was over thirty, an age at which Winnie could not but think it must be comparatively indifferent to a woman what happened — at which the snows of age must have begun to benumb her feelings, under any circumstances, and the loss of a husband or so did not much matter; but at eighteen, and to lose the first love that had ever touched your heart! to lose it without any reason — without the satisfaction of some dreadful obstacle in the way, or misunderstanding still more dreadful; without ever having heard the magical words and tasted that first rapture! — Ah, it was hard, very hard; and no wonder that Winnie was in a turmoil of rage, and bitterness, and despair.

The fact was, that she was so absorbed in her thoughts as not to see him there where he was waiting for her. He had seen her long ago, as she came down the winding road, betraying herself at the turnings by the flutter of her light dress — for Winnie's mourning was slight — and he had waited, as glad as she could be of the opportunity, and the chance of seeing her undisturbed, and free from all critical eyes. There is a kind of popular idea that it is only a good man, or one with a certain "nobility" or "generosity" in his character who is capable of being in love; but the idea is not so justifiable as it would seem to be. Captain Percival was not a good young man, nor would it be safe for any conscientious historian to claim for him generous or noble qualities to any marked degree; but at the same time I am not disposed to qualify the state of his sentiments by saying, as is generally said of un-

satisfactory characters, that he loved Winnie as much as he could love anything. He was in love with her, heart and soul, as much as if he had been a paladin. He would not have stayed at any obstacle, nor regarded either his own comfort or hers, or any other earthly bar between them. When Winnie thought him distant from her, and contemplating his departure, he had been haunting all the old walks which he knew Miss Seton and her niece were in the habit of taking. He was afraid of Mary — that was one thing indisputable — and he thought she would harm him, and bring up his old character against him; and felt instinctively that the harm which he thought he knew of her, could not be used against her here. And it was for this reason that he had not ventured again to present himself at the cottage; but he had been everywhere about, wherever he thought there was any chance of meeting the lady of his thoughts. And if Winnie had not been so anxious not to miss that possible visitor; if she had been coming and going, and doing all she usually did, their meeting must have taken place two days ago, and all the agony and trouble been spared. He watched her now, and held his breath, and traced her at all the turnings of the road, now by a puff of her black and white muslin dress, and then by a long streaming ribbon catching among the branches — for Winnie was fond of long ribbons wherever she could introduce them. And she was so absorbed with her own settled anguish, that she had stepped out upon him from among the trees before she was aware.

"Captain Percival!" said Winnie, with an involuntary cry; and she felt the blood so rush to her cheeks with sudden delight and surprise, that she was in an

instant put on her guard, and driven to account for it. — "I did not see there was any one here — what a fright you have given me. And we, who thought you had gone away," added Winnie, looking suddenly at him with blazing defiant eyes.

If he had not been in love, probably he would have known what it all meant — the start, the blush, the cry, and that triumphant, indignant, reproachful, exulting look. But he had enough to do with his own sensations, which makes a wonderful difference in such a case.

"Gone away!" he said, on the spur of the moment — "as if I could go away — as if you did not know better than that."

"I was not aware that there was anything to detain you," said Winnie; and all at once from being so tragical, her natural love of mischief came back, and she felt perfectly disposed to play with her mouse. "Tell me about it. Is it Sir Edward? or perhaps you, too, have had an affliction in your family. I think that is the worst of all," she said, shaking her pretty head mournfully — and thus the two came nearer to each other and laughed together, which was as good a means of *rapprochement* as anything else.

But the young soldier had waited too long for this moment to let it all go off in laughter. "If you only knew how I have been trying to see you," he said. "I have been at the school and at the mill, and in the woods — in all your pet places. Are you condemned to stay at home because of this affliction? I could not come to the cottage because, though Miss Seton is so

kind, I am sure your sister would do me an ill turn if she could."

Winnie was startled, and even a little annoyed by this speech — for it is a fact always to be borne in mind by social critics, that one member of a family may be capable of saying everything that is unpleasant about another, without at the same time being disposed to hear even an echo of his or her own opinion from stranger lips. Winnie was of this way of thinking. She had not taken to her sister, and was quite ready herself to criticise her very severely; but when somebody else did it, the result was very different. "Why should my sister do you an ill turn?" she said.

"Oh!" said young Percival; "it is because you know she knows that I know all about it ——"

"All about it!" said Winnie. She was tall already, but she grew two inches taller as she stood and expanded and looked her frightened lover into nothing. "There can be nothing about Mary, Captain Percival, which you and all the world may not know."

And then the young man saw he had made a wrong move. "I have not been haunting the road for hours to talk about Mrs. Ochterlony," he said. "She does not like me, and I am frightened for her. Oh, Winnie, you know very well why. You know I would tremble before anybody who might make *you* think ill of me. It is cruel to pretend you don't understand."

And then he took her hand and told her everything — all that she looked for, and perhaps more than all — for there are touches of real eloquence about what a man says when he is really in love (even if he should be no great things in his own person)

which transcend as much as they fall short of, the suggestions of a woman's curious fancy. She had said it for him two or three times in her own mind, and had done it far more elegantly and neatly. But still there was something about the genuine article which had not been in Winnie's imagination. There were fewer words, but there was a great deal more excitement, though it was much less cleverly expressed. And then, before they knew how, the crisis was over, the *dénouement* accomplished, and the two sitting side by side as in another world. They were sitting on the trunk of an old beech-tree, with the leaves rustling and the birds twittering over them, and Kirtell running, soft and sweet, hushed in its scanty summer whisper at their feet; all objects familiar, and well-known to them — and yet it was another world. As for Mr. Browning's poems about the unlived life, and the hearts all shrivelled up for want of a word at the right moment, Winnie most probably would have laughed with youthful disdain had they been suggested to her now. This little world, in which the fallen beech-tree was the throne, and the fairest hopes and imaginations possible to man, crowded about the youthful sovereigns, and paid them obsequious court, was so different from the old world, where Sir Edward at the Hall, and Aunt Agatha in the Cottage, were expecting the young people, that these two, as was not unnatural, forgot all about it, and lingered together, no one interfering with them, or even knowing they were there, for long enough to fill Miss Seton's tender bosom with wild anxieties and terrors. Winnie had not reached home at the early dinner-hour — a thing which was to Aunt Agatha as if the sun had declined to rise, or the earth

(to speak more correctly) refused to perform her proper revolutions. She became so restless, and anxious, and unhappy, that Mary, too, was roused into uneasiness. "It must be only that she is detained somewhere," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "She never would allow herself to be detained," cried Aunt Agatha, "and oh, Mary, my darling is unhappy. How can I tell what may have happened?" Thus some people made themselves very wretched about her, while Winnie sat in perfect blessedness, uttering and listening to all manner of heavenly nonsense on the trunk of the fallen tree.

Aunt Agatha's wretchedness, however, dispersed into thin air the moment she saw Winnie come in at the garden-gate, with Captain Percival in close attendance. Then Miss Seton, with natural penetration, saw in an instant what had happened; felt that it was all natural, and wondered why she had not foreseen this inevitable occurrence. "I might have known," she said to Mary, who was the only member of the party upon whom this wonderful event had no enlivening effect; and then Aunt Agatha recollected herself, and put on her sad face, and faltered an apology. "Oh, my dear love, I know it must be hard upon you to see it," she said, apologizing as it were to the widow for the presence of joy.

"I would be a poor soul indeed, if it was hard upon me to see it," said Mary. "No, Aunt Agatha, I hope I am not so shabby as that. I have had my day. If I look grave, it is for other reasons. I was not thinking of myself."

"My love! you were always so unselfish," said Miss Seton. "Are you really anxious about *him?* See how happy he looks — he cannot be so fond of her as that,

and so happy, and yet a deceiver. It is not possible, Mary."

This was in the afternoon, when they had come out to the lawn with their work, and the two lovers were still together — not staying in one place, as their elders did, but flitting across the line of vision now and then, and, as it were, pervading the atmosphere with a certain flavour of romance and happiness.

"I did not say he was a deceiver — he dared not be a deceiver to Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony; "there may be other sins than that."

"Oh, Mary, don't speak as if you thought it would turn out badly," cried Aunt Agatha, clasping her hands; and she looked into Mrs. Ochterlony's face as if somehow she had the power by retracting her opinion to prevent things from turning out badly. Mary was not a stoic, nor above the sway of all the influences around her. She could not resist the soft pleading eyes that looked into her face, nor the fascination of her young sister's happiness. She held her peace, and even did her best to smile upon the spectacle, and to hope in her heart that true love might work magically upon the man who had now, beyond redemption, Winnie's future in his hands. For her own part, she shrank from him with a vague sense of alarm and danger; and had it been possible to do any good by it, would have felt herself capable of any exertion to cast the intruder out. But it was evident that under present circumstances there was no good to be done. She kept her boys out of his way with an instinctive dread which she could not explain to herself, and shuddered when poor Aunt Agatha, hoping to conciliate all parties, set little Wilfrid for a moment on their visitor's

knee, and with a wistful wile reminded him of the new family relationships Winnie would bring him. Mary took her child away with a shivering sense of peril which was utterly unreasonable. Why had it been Wilfrid of all others who was brought thus into the foreground? Why should it be he who was selected as a symbol of the links of the future? Wilfrid was but an infant, and derived no further impression from his momentary perch upon Captain Percival's knee, than that of special curiosity touching the beard which was a new kind of ornament to the fatherless baby, and tempting for closer investigation; but his mother took him away, and carried him indoors, and disposed of him carefully in the room which Miss Seton had made into a nursery, with an anxious tremor which was utterly absurd and out of all reason. But though instinct acted upon her to this extent, she made no further attempt to warn Winnie or hinder the course of events which had gone too fast for her. Winnie would not have accepted any warning — she would have scorned the most trustworthy advice, and repulsed even the most just and right interference — and so would Mary have done in Hugh Ochterlony's case, when she was Winnie's age. Thus her mouth was shut, and she could say nothing. She watched the two with a pathetic sense of impotence as they went and came, thinking, oh, if she could but make him what Hugh Ochterlony was; and yet the Major had been far, very far from perfect, as the readers of this history are aware. When Captain Percival went away, the ladies were still in the garden; for it was necessary that the young man should go home to the Hall to join Sir Edward at dinner, and tell his story. Winnie, a

changed creature, stood at the garden-gate, leaning upon the low wall, and watched him till he was out of sight; and her aunt and her sister looked at her, each with a certain pathos in her face. They were both women of experience in their different ways, and there could not but be something pathetic to them in the sight of the young creature at the height of her happiness, all-confident and fearing no evil. It came as natural to them to think of the shadows that *must*, even under the happiest conditions, come over that first incredible brightness, as it was to her to feel that every harm and fear was over, and that now nothing could touch or injure her more. Winnie turned sharp round when her lover disappeared, and caught Mary's eye, and its wistful expression, and blazed up at once into momentary indignation, which, however, was softened by the contempt of youth for all judgment other than its own, and by the kindly influence of her great happiness. She turned round upon her sister, sudden and sharp as some winged creature, and set her all at once on her defence.

"You do not like him," she said, "but you need not say anything, Mary. It does not matter what you say. You had your day, and would not put up with any interference — and I know him a hundred — a thousand times better than you can do; and it is my day now."

"Yes," said Mary. "I did not mean to say anything. I do not like him, and I think I have reason; but Winnie, dear, I would give anything in the world to believe that you know best now."

"Oh, yes, I know best," said Winnie, with a soft laugh; "and you will soon find out what mistakes

people make who pretend to know — for I am sure he thinks there could be something said, on the other side, about you."

"About me," said Mary — and though she did not show it, but stood before her sister like a stately tower firm on its foundation, she was aware of a thrill of nervous trembling that ran through her limbs, and took the strength out of them. "What did he say about me?"

"He seemed to think there was something that might be said," said Winnie, lightly. "He was afraid of you. He said you knew that he knew all about you; see what foolish ideas people take up! and I said," Winnie went on, drawing herself up tall and straight by her stately sister's side, with that superb assumption of dignity which is fair to see at her age, "that there never could be anything about you that he and all the world might not know!"

Mary put out her hand, looking stately and firm as she did so — but in truth it was done half groping out of a sudden mist that had come up about her. "Thank you, Winnie," she said, with a smile that had anguish in it; and Winnie with a sudden tender impulse out of her own happiness, feeling for the first time the contrast, looked at Mary's black dress beside her own light one, and at Mary's hair as bright as her own, which was put away beneath that cap which she had so often mocked at, and threw her arms round her sister with a sudden thrill of compassion and tenderness unlike anything she had ever felt before.

"Oh, Mary, dear!" she cried, "does it seem heartless to be so happy and yet to know that you ——"

"No," said Mary, steadily — taking the girl, who

was as passionate in her repentance as in her rebellion, to her own bosom. "No, Winnie; no, my darling — I am not such a poor soul as that. I have had my day."

And it was thus that the cloud rolled off, or seemed to roll off, and that even in the midst of that sharp reminder of the pain which life might still have in store for her, the touch of nature came to heal and help. The enemy who knew all about it might have come in bringing with him sickening suggestions of horrible harm and mischief; but anything he could do would be in vain here, where everybody knew more about her still; and to have gained as she thought her little sister's heart, was a wonderful solace and consolation. Thus Mary's faith was revived again at the moment when it was most sorely shaken, and she began to feel, with a grateful sense of peace and security, the comfort of being, as Aunt Agatha said, among her own friends.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The announcement of Winnie's engagement made, as was to be looked for, a considerable commotion among all the people connected with her. The very next morning Sir Edward himself came down to the Cottage with a very serious face. He had been disposed to play with the budding affection and to take pleasure in the sight of the two young creatures as they drew towards each other; for Percival, though in love, was not without prudence (his friend thought), and Winnie, though very open to impressions, was ca-

pricious and fanciful, and not the kind of girl, Sir Edward imagined, to say Yes to the first man who asked her. Thus the only sensible adviser on the spot had wilfully blinded himself. It had not occurred to him that Winnie might think of Percival, not as the first man who had ever asked her, but as the only man whom she loved; nor that Percival, though prudent enough, liked his own way, and was as liable to be carried away by passion as a better man. These reflections had not come into Sir Edward's head, and consequently he had rather encouraged the growing tenderness, which now all at once had turned into earnest, and had become a matter of responsibility and serious concern. Sir Edward came into Miss Seton's pretty drawing-room with care on his brow. The young people had gone out together to Kirtell-side to visit the spot of their momentous interview, and doubtless to go over it all again, as people do at that foolish moment, and only Aunt Agatha and Mrs. Ochterlony were at home. Sir Edward went in, and sat down between the two ladies, and offered his salutations with a pensive gravity which made Mary smile, but brought a cloud of disquietude over Aunt Agatha's gentle countenance. He sighed as he said it was a fine day. He even looked sympathetically at the roses, as if he knew of some evil that was about to befall them; — and his old neighbour knew his ways and knew that he meant something, and with natural consciousness divined at once what it was.

"You have heard what has happened," said Aunt Agatha, trembling a little, and laying down her work. "It is so kind of you to come over at once; but I do hope that is not why you are looking so grave?"

"Am I looking grave?" said Sir Edward, clearing up in an elaborate way; "I did not mean it, I am sure. I suppose we ought to have seen it coming and been prepared; but these sort of things always take one by surprise. I did not think Winnie was the girl to — to make up her mind all at once, you know — the very first man that asked her. I suppose it was my mistake."

"If you think it was the very first that asked her!" cried Aunt Agatha, who felt this reproach go to her heart, "it *is* a mistake. She is only eighteen — a mere child — but I was saying to Mary only yesterday, that it was not for want of being admired ——"

"Oh, yes," said Sir Edward, with a little wave of his hand, "we all know she has been admired. One's eyes alone would have proved that; and she deserves to be admired; and that is generally a girl's chief stronghold, in my opinion. She knows it, and learns her own value, and does not yield to the first fellow who has the boldness to say right out ——"

"I assure you, Sir Edward," said Aunt Agatha, growing red and very erect in her chair, and assuming a steadiness which was unfortunately quite contradicted by the passionate quiver of her lip, "that you do Winnie great injustice — so far as being the first goes ——"

"What does it matter if he were the first or the fiftieth, if she likes him?" said Mary, who had begun by being much amused, but who had ended by being a little indignant; for she had herself married at eighteen and never had a lover but Hugh Ochterlony, and felt herself disapproved of along with her sister.

Upon which Sir Edward shook his head.

"Certainly, my dear Mary, if she likes him," said the Baronet; "but the discouraging thing is, that an inexperienced girl — a girl so very well brought up as Winnie has been — should allow herself, as I have said, to like the very first man who presents himself. One would have thought some sort of introduction was necessary before such a thought could have penetrated into her mind. After she had been obliged to receive it in that way — then, indeed —— But I am aware that there are people who have not my scruples," said Sir Edward, with a sigh; for he was, as all the neighbourhood was aware, a man of the most delicate mind.

"If you think my dear, pure-minded child is not scrupulous, Sir Edward!" cried poor Aunt Agatha — but her emotion was so great that her voice failed her; and Mary, half amused and half angry, was the only champion left for Winnie's character, thus unexpectedly assailed.

"Poor child, I think she is getting very hard measure," said Mary. "I don't mean to blame you, but I think both of you encouraged her up to the last moment. You let them be always together, and smiled on them; and they are young, and what else could you expect? It is more delicate to love than to flirt," said Mrs. Ochterlony. She had not been nearly so well brought up as her sister, nor with such advanced views, and what she said brought a passing blush upon her matron cheek. Winnie could have discussed all about love without the shadow of a blush, but that was only the result of the chronological difference, and had nothing to do with purity of heart.

"If we have had undue confidence," said Sir Ed-

ward, with a sigh, "we will have to pay for it. Mary speaks — as I have heard many women speak — without making any consideration of the shock it must be to a delicate young girl; and I think, after the share which I may say I have myself had in Winnie's education, that I might be permitted to express my surprise; and Percival ought to have shown a greater regard for the sacredness of hospitality. I cannot but say that I was very much vexed and surprised."

It may well be supposed that such an address, after poor Aunt Agatha's delight and exultation in her child's joy, and her willingness to see with Winnie's eyes and accept Winnie's lover on his own authority, was a most confounding utterance. She sat silent, poor lady, with her lips apart and her eyes wide open, and a kind of feeling that it was all over with Winnie in her heart. Aunt Agatha was ready to fight her darling's battles to her last gasp, but she was not prepared to be put down and made an end of in this summary way. She had all sorts of pretty lady-like deprecations about their youth and Winnie's inexperience ready in her mind, and had rather hoped to be assured that to have her favourite thus early settled in life was the very best that anybody would desire for her. Miss Seton had been so glad to think in former days that Sir Edward always understood her, and she had thought Winnie's interests were as dear to him as if she had been a child of his own; and now to think that Sir Edward regarded an event so important for Winnie as an evidence of indelicacy on her part, and of a kind of treachery on her lover's! All that Aunt Agatha could do was to throw an appealing look at Mary, who had hitherto been the only one dissatisfied or disapproving. She

knew more about Captain Percival than any one. Would not she say a word for them now?

"He must have thought that was what you meant when you let them be so much together," said Mary. "I think, if you will forgive me, Sir Edward, that it is not *their* fault."

Sir Edward answered this reproach only by a sigh. He was in a despondent rather than a combative state of mind. "And you see I do not know so much as I should like to know about him," he said, evading the personal question. "He is a very nice fellow; but I told you the other day I did not consider him a paladin; and whether he has enough to live upon, or anything to settle on her — My dear Mary, at least you will agree with me, that considering how short a time they have known each other, things have gone a great deal too far."

"I do not know how long they have known each other," said Mary, who now felt herself called upon absolutely to take Aunt Agatha's part.

"Ah, *I* know," said Sir Edward, "and so does your aunt; and things did not go at rail-road speed like this in *our* days. It is only about six weeks, and they are engaged to be married! I suppose you know as much about him as anybody — or so he gave me to understand at least; and do *you* think him a good match for your young sister?" added Sir Edward, with a tone of superior virtue which went to Mary's heart.

Mary was too true a woman not to be a partisan, and had the feminine gift of putting her own private sentiments out of the question in comparison with the cause which she had to advocate; but still it was an embarrassing question, especially as Aunt Agatha

was looking at her with the most pathetic appeal in her eyes.

"I know very little of Captain Percival," she said; "I saw him once only in India, and it was at a moment very painful to me. But Winnie likes him — and you must have approved of him, Sir Edward, or you would not have brought him here."

Upon which Aunt Agatha rose and kissed Mary, recognising perfectly that she did not commit herself on the merits of the case, but at the same time sustained it by her support. Sir Edward, for his part, turned a deaf ear to the implied reproach, but still kept up his melancholy view of the matter, and shook his head.

"He has good connexions," he said; "his mother was a great friend of mine. In other circumstances, and could we have made up our minds to it at the proper moment, she might have been Lady ——. But it is vain to talk of that. I think we might push him a little if he would devote himself steadily to his profession; but what can be expected from a man who wants to marry at five-and-twenty? I myself," said Sir Edward, with dignity, "though the eldest son —"

"Yes," said Aunt Agatha, unable to restrain herself longer, "and see what has come of it. You are all by yourself at the Hall, and not a soul belonging to you; and to see Francis Ochterlony with his statues and nonsense! — Oh, Sir Edward! when you might have had a dozen lovely children growing up round you —"

"Heaven forbid!" said Sir Edward, piously; and then he sighed — perhaps only from the mild melancholy which possessed him at the moment, and was occasioned by Winnie's indelicate haste to fall in love;

perhaps, also, from some touch of personal feeling. A dozen lovely children might be rather too heavy an amount of happiness, while yet a modified bliss would have been sweet. He sighed and leant his head upon his hand, and withdrew into himself for the moment in that interesting way which was habitual to him, and had gained him the title of "poor Sir Edward." It might be very foolish for a man (who had his own way to make in the world) to marry at five-and-twenty; but still, perhaps it was rather more foolish when a man did not marry at all, and was left in his old age all alone in a great vacant house. But naturally, it was not this view of the matter which he displayed to his feminine companions, who were both women enough to have triumphed a little over such a confession of failure. He had a fine head, though he was old, and his hand was as delicate and almost as pale as ivory, and he could not but know that he looked interesting in that particular attitude, though, no doubt, it was his solicitude for these two indiscreet young people which chiefly moved him. "I am quite at a loss what to do," he said. "Mrs. Percival is a very fond mother, and she will naturally look to me for an account of all this; and there is your Uncle Penrose, Mary — a man I could never bear, as you all know — he will come in all haste, of course, and insist upon settlements and so forth; and why all this responsibility should come on me, who have no desire in this world but for tranquillity and peace —"

"It need not come on you," said Mrs. Ochterlony; "we are not very great business people, but still, with Aunt Agatha and myself —"

Sir Edward smiled. The idea diverted him so much

that he raised his head from his hand. "My dear Mary," he said, "I have the very highest opinion of your capacity; but in a matter of this kind, for instance — And I am not so utterly selfish as to forsake my old neighbour in distress."

Here Aunt Agatha took up her own defence. "I don't consider that I am in distress," she said. "I must say, I did not expect anything like this, Sir Edward, from you. If it had been Mr. Penrose, with his mercenary ideas — I was very fond of Mary's poor dear mamma, and I don't mean any reflection on her, poor darling — but I suppose that is how it always happens with people in trade. Mr. Penrose is always a trial, and Mary knows that; but I hope I am able to bear something for my dear child's sake," Aunt Agatha continued, growing a little excited; "though I never thought that I should have to bear —" and then the poor lady gave a stifled sob, and added in the midst of it, "this from you!"

This was a kind of climax which had arrived before in the familiar friendship so long existing between the Hall and the Cottage. The two principals knew how to make it up better than the spectator did who was looking on with a little alarm and a little amusement. Perhaps it was as well that Mary was called away to her own individual concerns, and had to leave Aunt Agatha and Sir Edward in the height of their misunderstanding. Mary went away to her children, and perhaps it was only in the ordinary course of human nature that when she went into the nursery among those three little human creatures, who were so entirely dependent upon herself, there should be a smile upon her face as she thought of the two old

people she had left. It seemed to her, as perhaps it seems to most women in the presence of their own children, at sight of those three boys — who were "mere babies" to Aunt Agatha, but to Mary the most important existences in the world — as if this serio-comic dispute about Winnie's love affairs was the most quaintly-ridiculous exhibition. When she was conscious of this thought in her own mind, she rebuked it, of course; but at the first glance it seemed as if Winnie's falling in love was so trivial a matter — so little to be put in comparison with the grave cares of life. There are moments when the elder women, who have long passed through all that, and have entered upon another stage of existence, cannot but smile at the love-matters, without considering that life itself is often decided by the complexion of the early romance, which seems to belong only to its lighter and less serious side. Sir Edward and Aunt Agatha for their part had never, old as they both were, got beyond the first stage — and it was natural it should bulk larger in their eyes. And this time it was they who were right, and not Mary, whose children were but children, and in no danger of any harm. Whereas, poor Winnie, at the top of happiness — gay, reckless, daring, and assured of her own future felicity — was in reality a creature in deadly peril and wavering on the verge of her fate.

But when the day had come to an end, and Captain Percival had at last retired, and Winnie, a little languid after her lover's departure, sat by the open window watching, no longer with despite or displeasure, the star of light which shone over the tree-tops from the Hall, there occurred a scene of a different descrip-

tion. But for the entire change in Winnie's looks and manner, the absence of the embroidery frame at which she had worked so violently, and the languid softened grace with which she had thrown herself down upon a low chair, too happy and content to feel called upon to do anything, the three ladies were just as they had been a few evenings before; that is to say, that Aunt Agatha and Mary, to neither of whom any change was possible, were just as they had been before, while to the girl at the window, everything in heaven and earth had changed. The two others had had their day and were done with it. Though Miss Seton was still scarcely an old woman, and Mary was in the full vigour and beauty of life, they were both ashore high up upon the beach, beyond the range of the highest tide; while the other, in her boat of hope, was playing with the rippling incoming waters, and preparing to put to sea. It was not in nature that the two who had been at sea, and knew all the storms and dangers, should not look at her wistfully in her happy ignorance, perhaps even they looked at her with a certain envy too. But Aunt Agatha was not a woman who could let either well or ill alone — and it was she who disturbed the household calm which might have been profound that night, so far as Winnie was concerned.

"My dear love," said Aunt Agatha, with a timidity which implied something to tell, "Sir Edward has been here. Captain Percival had told him, you know —"

"Yes," said Winnie, carelessly, "I know."

"And, my darling," said Miss Seton, "I am sure it is what I never could have expected from him, who was always such a friend; but I sometimes think he gets a little strange — as he gets old, you know —"

This was what the unprincipled woman said, not caring in the least how much she slandered Sir Edward, or anybody else in the world, so long as she gave a little comfort to the child of her heart. And as for Winnie, though she had been brought up at his feet, as it were, and was supposed by himself and others to love him like a child of his own, she took no notice of this unfounded accusation. She was thinking of quite a different person, just as Aunt Agatha was thinking of her, and Mary of her boys. They were women, each preoccupied and absorbed in somebody else, and they did not care about justice. And thus Sir Edward for the moment fared badly among them, though, if any outside assailant had attacked him, they would all have fought for him to the death.

"Well!" said Winnie, still very carelessly, as Miss Seton came to a sudden stop.

"My dear love!" said Aunt Agatha, "he has not a word to say against Captain Percival, that I can see —"

"Against Edward?" cried Winnie, raising herself up. "Good gracious, Aunt Agatha, what are you thinking of? Against Edward! I should like to know what he could say. His own god-father — and his mother was once engaged to him — and he is as good as a relation, and the nearest friend he has. What could he possibly have to say? And besides, it was he who brought him here; and we think he will leave us the most of his money," Winnie said, hastily — and then was very sorry for what she had said, and blushed scarlet and bit her lips, but it was too late to draw back.

"Winnie," said Miss Seton, solemnly. "If he has

been calculating upon what people will leave to him when they die, I will think it is all true that Sir Edward said."

"You said Sir Edward did not say anything," cried Winnie. "What is it you have heard? It is of no use trying to deceive me. If there has been anything said against him, it is Mary who had said it. I can see by her face it is Mary. And if she is to be heard against *him*," cried Winnie, rising up in a blaze of wrath and indignation, "it is only just that he should be heard on the other side. He is too good and too kind to say things about my sister to me; but Mary is only a woman, and of course she does not mind what she says. She can blacken a man behind his back, though he is far too honourable and too — too delicate to say what he knows of *her!*"

This unlooked for assault took Mary so entirely by surprise, that she looked up with a certain bewilderment, and could not find a word to say. As for Aunt Agatha, she too rose and took Winnie's hands, and put her arms round her as much as the angry girl would permit.

"It was not Mary," she said. "Oh, Winnie, my darling, if it was for your good, and an ease to my mind, and better for you in life — if it was for your good, my dear love — that is what we are all thinking of — could not you give him up?"

It was, perhaps, the boldest thing Aunt Agatha had ever done in all her gentle life — and even Winnie could not but be influenced by such unusual resolution. She made a wild effort to escape for the first moment, and stood with her hands held fast in Aunt Agatha's hands, averting her angry face, and refusing

to answer. But when she felt herself still held fast, and that her fond guardian had the courage to hold to her question, Winnie's anger turned into another kind of passion. The tears came pouring to her eyes in a sudden violent flood, which she neither tried to stop nor to hide. "No!" cried Winnie, with the big thunder-drops falling hot and heavy. "What is *my* good without him? If it was for my harm I shouldn't care. Don't hold me, don't look at me, Aunt Agatha! I don't care for anything in the world but Edward. I would not give him up — no, not if it was to break everybody's heart. What is it all to me without Edward?" cried the passionate girl. And when Miss Seton let her go, she threw herself on her chair again, with the tears coming in floods, but still facing them both through this storm-shower with crimson cheeks and shining eyes. As for poor Aunt Agatha, she too tottered back to her chair, frightened and abashed, as well as in distress; for young ladies had not been in the habit of talking so freely in her days.

"Oh, Winnie — and we have loved you all your life; and you have only known him a few weeks," she said, faltering, and with a natural groan.

"I cannot help it," said Winnie; "you may think me a wretch, but I like him best. Isn't it natural I should like him best? Mary did, and ran away, and nobody was shocked at her; and even you yourself ——"

"I never, never, could have said such a thing all my life!" cried Aunt Agatha, with a maiden blush upon her sweet old cheeks.

"If you had, you would not have been a —— as you are now," said the dauntless Winnie; and she re-

covered in the twinkling of an eye, and wiped away her tears, and was herself again. Possibly what she had said was true and natural, as she asserted; but it is an unquestionable fact, that neither her aunt nor her sister could have said it for their lives. She was a young lady of the nineteenth century, and she acted accordingly; but it is a certain fact, as Aunt Agatha justly observed, whatever people may think now, that girls did not speak like that in *our* day.

CHAPTER XIX.

The few weeks which ensued were the most stormy and troublous period of all Miss Seton's life; and through her there was naturally a considerable disturbance of the peace of the Cottage. Though she lived so quietly, she had what is called in the country "a large circle," and had dwelt among her own people all her life, and was known to everybody about. It was a quiet neighbourhood, but yet there never was a neighbourhood so quiet as not to have correspondents and relations living out in the world, to whom all news went, and from whom all news came. And there were a number of "families" about Kirtell, not great people certainly, but very respectable people, gentry, and well-connected persons hanging on by various links to the great world. In this way Winnie's engagement, which nobody wanted to conceal, came to be known far and wide, as such facts are so apt to get known. And a great many people out in the world, who had once known Miss Seton, wrote letters to her, in which they suggested that perhaps she had forgotten them, but hoped that

she would excuse them, and attribute it to the regard which they had never ceased to feel for her, if they asked, Did she know Captain Percival very well, who was said to be engaged to her pretty niece? Had she heard what happened in the Isle of Man when his regiment was stationed there? and why it was that he did not go out to Gibraltar after he had got *that* appointment? Other people, who did not know Aunt Agatha, took what was after all the more disagreeable step of writing to their friends in the parish about the young man, whose career had certainly left traces, as it appeared, upon the memory of his generation. To rise every morning with a sense that such an epistle might be awaiting her on the breakfast-table — or to receive a visitor with the horrible conviction that she had come to look into her face, and hold her hand, and be confidential and sympathetic, and deliver a solemn warning — was an ordeal which Aunt Agatha found it hard to bear. She was a woman who never forgot her character as a maiden lady, and liked to be justified by precedents and to be approved of by all the world. And these repeated remonstrances had no doubt a great effect upon her mind. They filled her with terrible misgivings and embittered her life, and drove her now and then into so great a panic that she felt disposed to thrust Captain Percival out of the house and forbid his reappearance there. But then, Winnie. Winnie was not the girl to submit to any such violent remedies. If she could not see her lover there, she would find means to see him somewhere else. If she could not be married to him with stately propriety in her parish church, she would manage to marry him somehow in any irregular way, and she would by no

means hesitate to say so or shrink from the responsibility. And if it must be done, would it not be better that it should be done correctly, than incorrectly, and with all things decent and in order? Thus poor Aunt Agatha would muse as she gathered up her bundle of letters. It might have been all very well for parents to exercise their authority in the days when their children obeyed them; but what was the use of issuing commands to which nobody would pay any attention? Winnie had very plainly expressed her preference for her own happiness rather than her aunt's peace of mind; and though Miss Seton would never have consented to admit that Winnie was anything less than the most beautiful character, still she was aware that unreasoning obedience was not her faculty. Besides, another sentiment began to mingle with this prudential consideration. Everybody was against the poor young man. The first letters she received about him made her miserable; but after that there was no doubt a revulsion. Everybody was against him, poor fellow! — and he was so young, and could not, after all, have done so much harm in the world. "He has not had the time, Mary," she said, with an appeal to Mrs. Ochterlony for support. "If he had been doing wrong from his very cradle, he could not have had the time." She could not refuse to believe what was told her, and yet notwithstanding her belief she clung to the culprit. If he had found any other advocate it might have been different; but nobody took the other side of the question: nobody wrote a pretty letter to say what a dear fellow he was, and how glad his friends were to think he had found some one worthy

of him — not even his mother; and Aunt Agatha's heart accordingly became the *avvocato del diavolo.* Fair play was due even to Captain Percival. It was impossible to leave him assailed as he was by so many without one friend.

It was a curious sight to see how she at once received and ignored all the information thus conveyed to her. A woman of a harder type would probably, as women do, have imputed motives, and settled the matter with the general conclusion that "an enemy hath done this;" but Aunt Agatha could not help, for the moment at least, believing in everybody. She could not say right out, "It is not true," even to the veriest impostor who deceived and got money from her, and their name was legion. In her own innocent soul she had no belief in lies, and could not understand them; and it was easier for her to give credence to the wildest marvel than to believe that anybody could tell her a deliberate falsehood. She would have kissed the ladies who wrote to her of those stories about Captain Percival, and cried and wrung her hands, and asked, What could she do? — and yet her heart was by no means turned against him, notwithstanding her belief in what everybody said; which is a strange and novel instance, well enough known to social philosophers, but seldom remarked upon, of the small practical influence of belief upon life. "How can it be a lie, my dear child? what motive could they all have to tell lies?" she would say to Winnie, mournfully; and yet ten minutes after, when it was Mrs. Ochterlony she was speaking to, she would make her piteous appeal for him, poor fellow! — "Everybody is against him;

and he is so young still; and oh, Mary, how much he must need looking after," Aunt Agatha would say, "if it is all true!"

Perhaps it was stranger still that Mary, who did not like Captain Percival, and was convinced of the truth of all the stories told of him, and knew in her heart that he was her enemy and would not scruple to do her harm if the chance should come in his way — was also a little moved by the same argument. Everybody was against him. It was the Cottage against the world, so far as he was concerned; and even Mrs. Ochterlony, though she ought to have known better, could not help feeling herself one of a "side," and to a certain extent felt her honour pledged to the defence of her sister's lover. Had she, in the very heart of this stronghold which was standing out for him so stoutly, lifted up a testimony against him, she would have felt herself in some respects a domestic traitor. She might be silent on the subject, and avoid all comment, but she could not utter an adverse opinion, or join in with the general voice against which Aunt Agatha and Winnie stood forth so steadfastly. As for Winnie, every word that was said to his detriment made her more determined to adhere to him. What did it matter whether he was good or bad, so long as it was indisputably *he*? There was but one Edward Percival in the world, and he would still be Edward Percival if he had committed a dozen murders, or gambled twenty fortunes away. Such was Winnie's defiant way of treating the matter which concerned her more closely than anybody else. She carried things with a high hand in those days. All the world was against her, and she scorned the world. She attributed motives,

though Aunt Agatha did not. She said it was envy and jealousy and all the evil passions. She made wild counter-accusations, in the style of that literature which sets forth the skeleton in every man's closet. Who could tell what little incidents could be found out in the private history of the ladies who had so much to say about Captain Percival? This is so ordinary a mode of defence, that no doubt it is natural, and Winnie went into it with good will. Thus his standard was planted upon the Cottage, and however unkindly people might think of him outside, shelter and support were always to be found within. Even Peggy, though she did not always agree with her mistress, felt, as Mrs. Ochterlony did, that she was one of a side, and became a partisan with an earnestness that was impossible to Mary. Sir Edward shook his head still, but he was disarmed by the close phalanx and the determined aspect of Percival's defenders. "It is true love," he said in his sentimental way; "and love can work miracles when everything else has failed. It may be his salvation." This was what he wrote to Percival's mother, who, up to this moment, had been but doubtful in her approbation, and very anxious, and uncertain, as she said, whether she ought not to tell Miss Seton that Edward had been "foolish." He had been "foolish," even in his mother's opinion; and his other critics were, some of them, so tolerant as to say "gay," and some "wild," while a few used a more solemn style of diction; — but everybody was against him, whatever terms they might employ; everybody except the ladies at the Cottage, who set up his standard, and accepted him with all his iniquities upon his head.

It may be worth while at this point, before Mr.

Penrose arrives, who played so important a part in the business, to say a word about the poor young man who was thus universally assailed. He was five-and-twenty and a young man of expectations. Though he had spent every farthing which came to himself at his majority, and a good deal more than that, still his mother had a nice estate, and Sir Edward was his godfather, and the world was full of obliging tradespeople and other amiable persons. He was a handsome fellow, nearly six feet high, with plenty of hair, and a moustache of the most charming growth. The hair was of dull brown, which was rather a disadvantage to him, but then it went perfectly well with his pale complexion, and suited the cloudy look over the eyes, which was the most characteristic point in his face. The eyes themselves were good, and had, when they chose, a sufficiently frank expression, but there lay about the eyebrows a number of lurking hidden lines which looked like mischief — lines which could be brought into action at any moment, and could scowl, or lower, or brood, according to the fancy of their owner. Some people thought this uncertainty in his face was its greatest charm; you could never tell what a moment might bring forth from that moveable and changing forehead. It was suggestive, as a great many persons thought — suggestive of storm and thunder, and sudden disturbance, or even in some eyes of cruelty and gloom — though he was a fine young man, and gay and fond of his pleasure. Winnie, as may be supposed, was not of this latter opinion. She even loved to bring out those hidden lines, and call the shadows over his face, for the pleasure of seeing how they melted away again, according to the use and wont

of young ladies. It was a sort of uncertainty that was permissible to him, who had been a spoiled child, and whom everybody, at the beginning of his career, had petted and taken notice of; but possibly it was a quality which would not have called forth much admiration from a wife.

And with Winnie standing by him as she did — clinging to him closer at every new accusation, and proclaiming, without faltering, her indifference to anything that could be said, and her conviction that the worse he was the more need he had of her — Captain Percival, too, took matters very lightly. The two foolish young creatures even came to laugh, and make fun of it in their way. "Here is Aunt Agatha coming with another letter; I wonder if it is to say that I poisoned my grandmother, this time?" cried the young man; and they both laughed as if it was the best joke in the world. If ever there was a moment in which, when they were alone, Winnie did take a momentary thought of the seriousness of the position, her gravity soon dissipated itself. "I know you have been very naughty," she would say, clasping her pretty hands upon his arm; "but you will never, never do it again," and the lover, thus appealed to, would make the tenderest and most eager assurances. What temptation could he ever have to be "naughty" with such an angel by his side? And Winnie was pleased enough to play the part of the angel — though that was not, perhaps, her most characteristic development — and went home full of happiness and security; despising the world which never had understood Edward, and thinking with triumph of the disappointed women less happy than herself, who, out of revenge, had no doubt got up

this outcry against him. "For I don't mean to defend him out and out," she said, her eyes sparkling with malice and exultation; "I don't mean to say that he has not behaved very badly to a great many people:" and there was a certain sweet self-glorification in the thought which intoxicated Winnie. It was wicked, but somehow she liked him better for having behaved badly to a great many people: and naturally any kind of reasoning was entirely ineffectual with a foolish girl who had taken such an idea into her mind.

Thus things went on; and Percival went away and returned again, and paid many flying visits, and, present and absent, absorbed all Winnie's thoughts. It was not only a first love, but it was a first occupation to the young woman, who had never felt, up to this time, that she had a sufficient sphere for her energies. Now she could look forward to being married, to receiving all the presents, and being busy about all the business of that important moment; and beyond lay life — life without any one to restrain her, without even the bondage of habit, and the necessity of taking into consideration what people would think. Winnie said frankly that she would go with him anywhere, that she did not mind if it was India, or even the Cape of Good Hope; and her eyes sparkled to think of the everything new which would replace to her all the old bonds and limits: though, in one point of view, this was a cruel satisfaction, and very wounding and injurious to some of the other people concerned.

"Oh, Winnie, my darling! and what am I to do without you?" Aunt Agatha would cry; and the girl would kiss her in her laughing way. "It must have come, sooner or later," she said; "you always said so

yourself. I don't see why you should not get married too, Aunt Agatha; you are perfectly beautiful sometimes, and a great deal younger than — many people; or, at least, you will have Mary to be your husband," Winnie would add, with a laugh, and a touch of affectionate spite: for the two sisters, it must be allowed, were not to say fond of each other. Mary had been brought up differently, and was often annoyed, and sometimes shocked, by Winnie's ways: and Winnie — though at times she seemed disposed to make friends with her sister — could not help thinking of Mary as somehow at the bottom of all that had been said about Edward. This, indeed, was an idea which her lover and she shared: and Mary's life was not made pleasanter to her by the constant implication that he, too, could tell something about her — which she despised too much to take any notice of, but which yet was an offence and an insult. So that on the whole — even before the arrival of Mr. Penrose — the Cottage on Kirtell-side, though as bowery and fair as ever, was, in reality, an agitated and even an uncomfortable home.

CHAPTER XX.

Mr. Penrose was the uncle of Mary and Winnie, their mother's only brother. Mrs. Seton had come from Liverpool originally, and though herself very "nice," had not been, according to Aunt Agatha's opinion, "of a nice class." And her brother shared the evil conditions, without sharing the good. He was of his class soul and body, and it was not a nice class — and, to

tell the truth, his nieces had been brought up to ignore rather than to take any pleasure in him. He was not a man out of whom, under the best circumstances, much satisfaction could be got. He was one of the men who always turn up when something about money is going on in a house. He had had to do with all the wills and settlements in the family, though they were of a very limited description; but Mr. Penrose did not despise small things, and was of opinion, that even if you had only a hundred pounds, you ought to know all about it, and how to take care of it. And he had once been very kind to Aunt Agatha, who was always defective in her arithmetic, and who, in earlier days, while she still thought of a possible change in her condition, had gone beyond the just limit of her income, and got into difficulties. Mr. Penrose had interfered at that period, and had been very kind, and set her straight, and had given her a very telling address upon the value of money: and though Miss Seton was not one of the people who take a favour as an injury, still she could have forgiven him a great many ill turns sooner than that good one. He had been very kind to her and had ruffled all her soft plumes, and rushed up against her at all her tender points; and the very sound of his name was a lively irritant to Aunt Agatha. But he had to be acquainted with Winnie's engagement, and when he received the information, he lost no time in coming to see about it. He was a large, portly, well-to-do man, with one of his hands always in his pocket, and seemed somehow to breathe money, and to have no ideas which did not centre in it; and yet he had a good many ideas, and was a clever man in his way. With him, as with many people in the

world, there was one thing needful, and that one thing was money. He thought it was a duty to possess something — a duty which a man owed absolutely to himself, and to all who belonged to him — and if he did not acquit himself well on this point, he was, in Mr. Penrose's opinion, a very indifferent sort of person. There is something immoral to most people in the fact of being poor, but to Mr. Penrose it was a crime. He was very well off himself, but he was not a man to communicate of his goods as he did of his advice; and then he had himself a family, and could not be expected to give anything except advice to his nieces — and as for that one good thing, it was at their command in the most liberal way. He came to the Cottage, which was so especially a lady's house, and pervaded the whole place with his large male person, diffusing through it that moral fragrance which still betrays the Englishman, the man of business, the Liverpool man, wherever he may happen to bless the earth. Perhaps in that sweet-smelling dainty place, the perfume which breathed from Mr. Penrose told more decidedly than in the common air. As soon as you went in at the garden-gate you became sensible that the atmosphere was changed, and that a Man was there. Perhaps it may be thought that the presence of a man in Aunt Agatha's maiden bower was not what might be called strictly proper, and Miss Seton herself had doubts on the subject; but then, Mr. Penrose never asked for any invitation, and it would have been very difficult to turn him out; and Mary was there, who at least was a married lady. He came without any invitation, and asked which was his room as if it had been his own house — and he complained of what he called

"the smell" of the roses, and declared he would tear down all the sickly jasmine from the side of the house if it belonged to him. All this Miss Seton endured silently, feeling it her duty, for Winnie's sake, to keep all her connexions in good humour; but the poor lady suffered terribly under the process, as everybody could see.

"I hope it is only a conditional sort of engagement," Mr. Penrose said, after he had made himself comfortable, and had had a good dinner, and came into the drawing-room the first evening. The lovers had seized the opportunity to escape to Kirtell-side, and Mary was with her boys in the garden, and poor Aunt Agatha, a martyr of civility, was seated alone, awaiting the reappearance of her guest, and smiling upon him with anxious politeness. He threw himself into the largest and most solid chair he could find, and spread himself, as it seemed, all over the room — a Man, coarse and undisguised, in that soft feminine paradise. Poor Sir Edward's graceful presence, and the elegant figure of Captain Percival, made no such impression. "I hope you have not settled it all without consulting anybody. To be sure, that don't matter very much; but I know you ladies have a summary way of settling such affairs."

"Indeed, I — I am afraid — I — I hope — it is all settled," said Aunt Agatha, with tremulous dignity. "It is not as if there was a great deal of money to settle. They are not — not rich, you know," she added, nervously. This was the chief thing to tell, and she was anxious to get it over at once.

"Not rich?" said Mr. Penrose. "No, I suppose not. A rich fellow would not have been such a fool

as to entangle himself with Winnie, who has only her pretty face; but he has something, of course. The first thing to ascertain is, what they will have to live on, and what he can settle upon her. I suppose you have not let it go so far without having a kind of idea on these points?"

"Oh, yes," said Aunt Agatha, with a very poor pretence at composure; "oh, yes, Mr. Penrose, that is all quite right. He has very nice expectations. I have always heard that Mrs. Percival had a charming little property; and Sir Edward is his godfather, and very fond of him. You will see it will come all right about that."

"Yes," said Mr. Penrose, who was nursing one of his legs — a colossal member, nearly as big as his hostess — in a meditative way, "I hope it will when *I* come to look into it. But we must have something more than expectations. What has he of his own? — and what do his mother and Sir Edward mean to do for him? We must have it in pounds, shillings, and pence, or he shan't have Winnie. It is best that he should make up his mind about that."

Aunt Agatha drew a frightened, panting breath; but she did not say anything. She had known what she would have to brave, and she was aware that Winnie would not brave it, and that to prevent a breach with her darling's only rich relation, it was necessary and expedient as long as she was alone to have it all out.

"Let me see," said Mr. Penrose, "you told me what he was in your letter — Captain, ain't he? As for his pay, that don't count. Let us go systematically to work if we are to do any good. I know ladies are very vague about business matters, but still you must

know something. What sort of a fellow is he, and what has he got of his own?"

"Oh, he is very nice," cried Aunt Agatha, consoled to find a question she could answer; "very, very nice. I do think you will like him very much; such a fine young fellow, and with what you gentlemen call no nonsense about him," said the anxious woman; "and with *excellent* connexions," she added, faltering again, for her enthusiasm awoke no answer in Mr. Penrose's face.

"My dear Miss Agatha," he said in his offensive way — and he always called her Miss Agatha, which was very trying to her feelings — "you need not take the trouble to assure me that a handsome young fellow who pays her a little attention, is always very nice to a lady. I was not asking whether he was nice; I was asking what were his means — which is a very much more important part of the subject, though you may not think so," Mr. Penrose added. "A charming little house like this, for instance, where you can have everything within yourself, and can live on honey and dew I suppose, may be kept on nothing — though you and I, to be sure, know a little different ——"

"Mr. Penrose," said Aunt Agatha, trembling with indignation, "if you mean that the dinner was not particular enough ——"

"It was a charming little dinner," said Mr. Penrose, "just what it ought to have been. Nothing could have been nicer than that white soup; and I think I am a judge. I was speaking of something to live on; a pretty house like this, I was saying, is not an analogous case. You have everything within yourself — eggs, and vegetables, and fruit, and your butter and

milk so cheap. I wish we could get it like that in Liverpool, and — pardon me — no increase of family likely, you know."

"My niece Mary and her three children have come to the Cottage since you were last here, Mr. Penrose," said Aunt Agatha, with a blush of shame and displeasure. "It was the only house of all her relations that she could come to with any comfort, poor dear — perhaps you don't call that an increase of family; and as for the milk and butter ——"

"She must pay you board," said Mr. Penrose, decisively; "there can be no question about that; your little money has not always been enough for yourself, as we both know. But all this is merely an illustration I was giving. It has nothing to do with the main subject. If these young people marry, my dear Miss Agatha, their family may be increased by inmates who will pay no board."

This was what he had the assurance to say to an unmarried lady in her own house — and to laugh and chuckle at it afterwards, as if he thought it a capital joke. Aunt Agatha was struck dumb with horror and indignation. Such eventualities might indeed, perhaps must, be discussed by the lawyers where there are settlements to make; but to talk of them to a maiden lady when alone, was enough to make her drop through the very floor with consternation. She made no attempt to answer, but she did succeed in keeping her seat and to a certain extent her self-possession, for Winnie's sake.

"It is a different sort of thing altogether," said the family adviser. "Things may be kept square in a quiet lady's house — though even that is not always

the case, as we are both aware; but two young married people, who are just as likely as not to be extravagant and all that — If he has not something to settle on her, I don't see how I can have anything to do with it," Mr. Penrose continued; "and you will not answer me as to what he has of his own."

"He has his — his pay," said poor Aunt Agatha. "I am told it is a great deal better than it used to be; and he has, I think, some — some money in the Funds. I am sure he will be glad to settle that on Winnie; and then his mother, and Sir Edward. I have no doubt myself, though really they are too young to marry, that they will do very well on the whole."

"Do you know what living means, Miss Agatha?" asked Mr. Penrose, solemnly, "when you can speak in this loose way? Butchers' bills are not so vague as your statements, I can tell you; and a pretty girl like that ought to do very well, even though she has no money. It is not *her* fault, poor thing," the rich uncle added, with momentary compassion; and then he asked, abruptly, "What will Sir Edward do for them?" as if he had presented a pistol at his companion's head.

"Oh, Mr. Penrose!" cried Aunt Agatha, forgetting all her policy, and what she had just said. "Surely, surely, you would not like them to calculate upon Sir Edward! He is not even a relation. He is only Edward's godfather. I would not have him applied to, not for the world."

"Then what have you been talking to me all this while about?" cried Mr. Penrose, with a look and sense of outraged virtue. And Aunt Agatha, seeing how she had betrayed her own position, and weary of the contest, and driven to her wits' end, gave way and cried a little

—which at that moment, vexed, worried, and mortified as she was, was all she could do.

And then Mr. Penrose got up and walked away, whistling audibly, through the open window, into the garden, leaving the chintz cover on his chair so crumpled up and loosened out of all its corners, that you could have told a mile off that a man had been there. What he left behind him was not that subtle agreeable suggestion of his presence which hung around the footsteps of young Percival, or even of Sir Edward, but something that felt half like an insult to the feminine inhabitants — a disagreeable assertion of another kind of creature who thought himself superior to them — which was an opinion which they did not in the least share, having no illusions so far as he went. Aunt Agatha sank back into her chair with a sense of relief, which she afterwards felt she ought not to have entertained. She had no right to such a feeling, for she had done no good; and instead of diverting the common enemy from an attack upon Winnie or her lover, had actually roused and whetted him, and made him more likely than ever to rush at those young victims, as soon as ever he should have the chance. But notwithstanding, for the moment to be rid of him, and able to draw breath a little, and dry her incipient tears, and put the cover straight upon that ill-used chair, did her good. She drew a long breath, poor soul, and felt the ease and comfort of being left to herself; even though next moment she might have to brace herself up and collect all her faculties, and face the adversary again.

But in the meantime he had gone out to the garden, and was standing by Mary's side, with his hand in his

pocket. He was telling Mary that he had come out in despair to her, to see if she knew anything about this sad business — since he found her Aunt Agatha quite as great a fool about business matters as she always was. He wanted to know if she, who knew what was what, could give him any sort of a reasonable idea about this young fellow whom Winnie wanted to marry — which was as difficult a question for Mrs. Ochterlony as it had been for Miss Seton. And then in the midst of the conversation the two culprits themselves appeared, as careless about the inquiring uncle as they were about the subject of his anxiety. Winnie, who was not given to the reticences practised by her aunt and her sister, had taken care to convey a very clear idea of her Uncle Penrose, and her own opinion of him, to the mind of Percival. He was from Liverpool, and not "of a nice class." He was not Winnie's guardian, nor had he any legal control over her; and in these circumstances it did not seem by any means necessary to either of the young people to show any undue attention to his desires, or be disturbed by his interference; for neither of them had been brought up to be dutiful to all the claims of nature, like their seniors. "Go away directly, that he may not have any chance of attacking you," Winnie had said to her lover; for though she was not self-denying or unselfish to speak of, she could be so where Percival was concerned. "We can manage him among us," she added, with a laugh — for she had no doubt of the co-operation of both her aunt and sister, in the case of Uncle Penrose. And in obedience to this arrangement, Captain Percival did nothing but take off his hat in honour of Mary, and say half a dozen words of the most ordinary

salutation to the stranger before he went away. And then Winnie came in, and came to her sister's side, and stood facing Mr. Penrose, in all the triumph and glory of her youth. She was beautiful, or would be beautiful, everybody had long allowed; but she had still retained a certain girlish meagreness up to a very recent date. Now all that had changed, like everything else; she had expanded, it appeared, as her heart expanded and was satisfied — everything about her looked rounder, fuller, and more magnificent. She came and stood before the Liverpool uncle, who was a man of business, and thinking of no such vanities, and struck him dumb with her splendour. He could talk as he liked to Aunt Agatha, or even to Mary in her widow's cap, but this radiant creature, all glowing with love and happiness, took away his breath. Perhaps it was then, for the first time in his life, that Mr. Penrose actually realized that there was something in the world for which a man might even get to be indifferent about the balance at his banker's. He gave an involuntary gasp; and though up to this moment he had thought of Winnie only as a child, he now drew back before her, and stopped whistling, and took his hand out of his pocket, which perhaps was as decided an act of homage as it was in him to pay.

But of course such a manifestation could not last. After another moment he gave a "humph" as he looked at her, and then his self-possession came back. "So that was your Captain, I suppose?" he said.

"Yes, uncle, that was my Captain," said the dauntless Winnie, "and I hope you approve of him; though it does not matter if you don't, for you know it is all

settled, and nobody except my aunt and his mother has any right to say a word."

"If his mother is as wise a judge as your aunt —" said Mr. Penrose; but yet all the same, Winnie's boldness imposed upon him a little. It was impossible to imagine that a grand creature like this, who was not pale nor sentimental, nor of Agatha Seton's kind, could contemplate with such satisfaction any Captain who had asked her to marry him upon nothing a year.

"That is all very fine," Mr. Penrose added, taking courage; "you can make your choice as you please, but it is my business to look after the money. If you and your children come to me starving, twenty years hence, and ask how I could possibly let you marry such a —"

"Do you think you will be living in twenty years, Uncle Penrose?" said Winnie. "I know you are a great deal older than Aunt Agatha; — but if you are, we will not come, I promise you. We shall keep our starvation to ourselves."

"I can't tell how old your Aunt Agatha is," said Mr. Penrose, with natural offence; "and you must know, Miss Winnie, that this is not how you should talk to me."

"Very well, uncle," said the daring girl; "but neither is your way the way to talk to me. You know I have made up my mind, and that everything is settled, and that it does not matter the least to me if Edward was a beggar; and you come here with your money, as if that was the only thing to be thought of. What do I care about money? — and you might try till the end of the world, and you never would break it off," she cried, flashing into a brilliant glow of pas-

sion and vehemence such as Mr. Penrose did not understand. He had expected to have a great deal of difficulty, but he had never expected to be defied after this fashion; and the wildness of her womanish folly made the good man sad.

"You silly girl!" he said, with profound pathos, "if you only knew what nonsense you were speaking. There is nobody in this world but cares about money; you can do nothing without it, and marry least of all. And you speak to me with such an example before your eyes; look at your sister Mary, how she has come with all those helpless children to be, most likely, a burden on her friends —"

"Uncle Penrose!" cried Winnie, putting up her two beautiful hands to stop his mouth; but Mr. Penrose was as plain-spoken as Winnie herself was, though in a different way.

"I know perfectly well she can hear me," he said, "and she ought to hear me, and to read you a lesson. If Mary had been a sensible girl, and had married a man who could make proper settlements upon her, and make a provision for his family, do you think she would have required to come here to seek a shelter — do you think —"

"Oh, Mary, he is crazy; don't mind him!" cried Winnie, forgetting for the moment all about her own affairs, and clinging to her sister in real distress.

And then it was Mrs. Ochterlony's turn to speak.

"I did not come to seek a shelter," she said; "though I know they would have given it me all the same. I came to seek love and kindness, uncle, which you cannot buy with money: and if there was nothing

more than want of money between Winnie and Captain Percival ——"

"Mary!" cried Winnie, impetuously, "go in and don't say any more. You shall not be insulted while I am here; but don't say anything about Edward. Leave me to have it out with Uncle Penrose, and go away."

And somehow Mary obeyed. She would not have done it a month ago; but she was wearied of contention, and broken in spirit, and, instead of standing still and defending herself, she withdrew from the two belligerents, who were both so ready to turn their arms against her, and went away. She went to the nursery, which was deserted: for her boys were still outside in the lingering daylight. None of them were able to advise, or even to sympathize with their mother. They could give her their childish love, but nothing else in the world. The others had all some one to consult, some one to refer to, but Mary was alone. Her heart beat dull and low, with no vehement offence at the bitter words she had just heard, but with a heavy despondency and sense of her solitude, which her very attitude showed — for she did not sit down, or lie down, or try to find any fictitious support, but stood up by the vacant fire-place with her eyes fixed upon nothing, holding unconsciously the little chain which secured her watch, and letting its beads drop one by one from her fingers. "Mary has come home to be a burden on her friends," said Uncle Penrose. She did not resent it wildly, as she might have done some time before, but pondered it with wondering pain and a dull sense of hopelessness. How did it happen that she, of all women, had come to such a position? what

correspondence was there between that and all her past? and what was the future to be? which, even now, she could make no spasmodic changes in, but must accept and endure. This was how Mary's mind was employed while Winnie, reckless and wilful, defied Uncle Penrose in the garden. For the time, the power of defying any one seemed to have died out of Mary's breast.

CHAPTER XXI.

Mr. Penrose, however, was not a man of very lively feelings, and bore no malice against Winnie for her defiance, nor even against Mary, to whom he had been so cruel, which was more difficult. He was up again, cheerful and full of energy in the morning, ready for his mission. If Winnie began the world without something to live upon, or with any prospect of ever being a burden on her friends, at all events it would not be his fault. As it happened, Aunt Agatha received at the breakfast-table the usual invariable letter containing a solemn warning against Captain Percival, and she was affected by it, as she could not help always being affected; and the evident commotion it excited in the party was such that Mr. Penrose could not but notice it. When he insisted upon knowing what it was, he was met by what was, in reality, very skilful fencing on Miss Seton's part, who was not destitute altogether of female skill and art: but Aunt Agatha's defence was made useless by the impetuosity of Winnie, who scorned disguise.

"Oh, let us hear it, please," she said, "let us hear. *We* know what it is about. It is some new story — some lie, about my poor Edward. They may save themselves the trouble. *I* would not believe one of them, if it was written on the wall like Belshazzar's feast; and if I did believe them I would not care," said Winnie, vehemently; and she looked across, as she never could help looking, to where her sister sat.

"What is it?" said Mr. Penrose; "something about your Captain? Miss Agatha, considering my interest in the matter, I hope you will let me hear all that is said."

"It is nothing, absolutely nothing," said Aunt Agatha, faltering. "It is only some foolish gossip, you know — garrison stories, and that sort of thing. He was a very young man, and was launched upon life by himself — and — and — I think I may say he must have been imprudent. Winnie, my dear love, my heart bleeds to say it, but he must have been imprudent. He must have entangled himself and — and —— And then there are always so many designing people about to lead poor young men astray," said Aunt Agatha, trembling for the result of her explanation: while Winnie divided her attention between Mr. Penrose, before whom this new view of the subject was unfolded for the first time, and Mary, whom she regarded as a natural enemy and the probable origin of it all.

"Wild, I suppose?" said Mr. Penrose, with sublime calm. "They're all alike, for that matter. So long as he doesn't bet or gamble — that's how those confounded young fellows ruin themselves." And then he dismissed the subject with a wave of the hand.

am going up to the Hall to talk it all over with Sir Edward, and see what can be done. This sort of penniless nonsense makes me sick," the rich man added; "and you women are the most unreasonable creatures — one might as well talk to a stone wall."

Thus it was that for once in their lives the two Miss Setons, Agatha and Winnie, found Uncle Penrose for the moment half divine; they looked at him with wide open eyes, with a wondering veneration. They were only women after all, and had been giving themselves a great deal of trouble about Captain Percival's previous history; but it all sank into mere contemptible gossip under the calm glance of Mr. Penrose. He was not enthusiastic about Edward, and therefore his impartial calm was all the more satisfying. *He* thought nothing of it all, though it had been driving *them* distracted. When he went away on his mission to the Hall, Winnie, in her enthusiasm, ran into Aunt Agatha's arms.

"You see he does not mind," said Winnie, — though an hour before she had been far from thinking Mr. Penrose an authority. "He thinks it is all gossip and spite, as I always said."

And Aunt Agatha for her part was quite overcome by the sudden relief. It felt like a deliverance, though it was only Mr. Penrose's opinion. "My dear love, men know the world," she said; "that is the advantage of having somebody to talk to; and I always said that your uncle, though he is sometimes disagreeable, had a great deal of sense. You see he knows the world."

"Yes, I suppose he must have sense," said Winnie; and in the comfort of her heart she was ready to attribute all good gifts to Mr. Penrose, and could have

kissed him as he walked past the window with his hand in his pocket. She would not have forsaken her Edward whatever had been found out about him, but still to see that his wickedness (if he had been wicked) was of no consequence in the eyes of a respectable man like Uncle Penrose, was such a consolation even to Winnie as nothing can express. "We are all a set of women, and we have been making a mountain out of a molehill," she said, and the tears came to her bright eyes; and then, as Mary was not moved into any such demonstrations of delight, Winnie turned her arms upon her sister in pure gaiety of heart.

"Everybody gets talked about," she said. "Edward was telling me about Mary even — that she used to be called Madonna Mary at the station; and that there was some poor gentleman that died. I supposed he thought she ought to be worshipped like Our Lady. Didn't you feel dreadfully guilty and wretched, Mary, when he died?"

"Poor boy," said Mrs. Ochterlony, who had recovered her courage a little with the morning light. "It had nothing to do with Our Lady as you say; it was only because he had been brought up in Italy, poor fellow, and was fond of the old Italian poets, and the soft Italian words."

"Then perhaps it was Madonna Mary he was thinking of," said Winnie, with gay malice, "and you must have felt a dreadful wretch when he died."

"We felt very sad when he died," said Mary, — "he was only twenty, poor boy: but, Winnie dear, Uncle Penrose is not an angel, and I think now I will say my say. Captain Percival is very fond of you, and you are very fond of him, and I think, whatever

the past may have been, that there is hope if you will be a little serious. It is of consequence. Don't you think that I wish all that is best in the world for you, my only little sister? And why should you distrust me? You are not silly nor weak, and I think you might do well yet, very well, my dear, if you were really to try."

"I think we shall do very well without trying," said Winnie, partly touched and partly indignant; "but it is something for you to say, Mary, and I am sure I am much obliged to you for your good advice all the same."

"Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony, taking her hands, "I know the world better than you do — perhaps even better than Uncle Penrose, so far as a woman is concerned. I don't care if you are rich or poor, but I want you to be happy. It will not do very well without trying. I will not say a word about him, for you have set your heart on him, and that must be enough. And some women can do everything for the people they love. I think, perhaps, you could, if you were to give your heart to it, and try."

It was not the kind of address Winnie had expected, and she struggled against it, trying hard to resist the involuntary softening. But after all nature was yet in her, and she could not but feel that what Mary was saying came from her heart.

"I don't see why you should be so serious," she said; "but I am sure it is kind of you, Mary. I — I don't know if I could do — what you say; but whatever I can do I will for Edward!" she added hastily, with a warmth and eagerness which brought the colour to her cheek and the light to her eye; and then the

two sisters kissed each other as they had never done before, and Winnie knelt down by Mary's knee, and the two held each other's hands, and clung together, as it was natural they should, in that confidence of nature which is closer than any other except that between mother and daughter — the fellow-feeling of sisters, destined to the same experience, one of whom has gone far in advance, and turning back can trace, step by step, in her own memory, the path the other has to go.

"Don't mistrust me, Winnie," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "I have had a little to bear, though I have been very happy, and I could tell you many things — though I will not, just now; but, Winnie dear, what I want is, that you should make up your mind to it; not to have everything you like, and live in a fairy tale, but to keep right, and to keep *him* right. If you will promise to think of this, and to take it bravely upon you, I will still hope that all may be well."

Her look was so serious that for the first time Winnie's heart forgave her. Neither jealousy, nor ill-temper, nor fear of evil report on her own side could have looked out of Mary's eyes at her little sister with such a wistful longing gaze. Winnie was moved in spite of herself, and thrilled by the first pang of uncertainty that had yet touched her. If Mary had no motive but natural affection, was it then really a hideous gulf of horrible destruction, on the verge of which she was herself tripping so lightly? Something indefinable came over Winnie's face as that thought moved her. Should it be so, what then? If it was to save him, if it was to perish with him, what did it matter? the only place in the world for her was [illegible] made her choice, and there

no alternative even should she see the gulf as Curtius did, and leap conscious into it in the eye of day. All this passed through her mind in a moment, as she knelt by Mary's side holding her hands — and came out so on her face that Mary could read something like it in the sudden changing of the fair features and expansion of the eyes. It was as if the soul had been startled, and sprang up to those fair windows, to look out upon the approaching danger, making the spectator careless of their beauty, out of regard to the nobler thing that used them for the moment. Then Winnie rose up suddenly, and gave her sister a hearty kiss, and threw off her sudden gravity as if it had been a cloud.

"Enough of that," she said; "I will try and be good, and so I think will — we all. And Mary, don't look so serious. I mean to be happy, at least as long as I can," cried Winnie. She was the same Winnie again — gay, bold, and careless, before five minutes had passed; and Mary had said her say, and there was now no more to add. Nothing could change the destiny which the thoughtless young creature had laid out for herself. If she could have foreseen the distinctest wretchedness it would have been all the same. She was ready to take the plunge even into the gulf — and nothing that could be said or done could change it now.

In the meantime, Mr. Penrose had gone up to the Hall to talk it over with Sir Edward, and was explaining his views with a distinctness which was not much more agreeable in the Hall than it had been in the Cottage. "I cannot let it go on unless some provision can be made," he said. "Winnie is very handsome, and you must all see she might have done a great deal

better. If I had her over in Liverpool, as I have several times thought of doing, I warrant you the settlements would have been of a different description. She might have married anybody, such a girl as that," continued Mr. Penrose, in a regretful business way. It was so much capital lost that might have brought in a much greater profit; and though he had no personal interest in it, it vexed him to see people throwing their chances away.

"That may be, but it is Edward Percival she chooses to marry, and nobody else," said Sir Edward testily; "and she is not a girl to do as you seem to think, exactly as she is told."

"We should have seen about that," said Mr. Penrose; "but in the meantime, he has his pay and she has a hundred a year. If Mrs. Percival will settle three hundred on him, and you, perhaps, two ——"

"I, two!" cried Sir Edward, with sudden terror; "why should I settle two? You might as well tell me to retire from the Hall, and leave them my house. And pray, Mr. Penrose, when you are so liberal for other people, what do you mean to give yourself?"

"I am a family man," said Uncle Penrose, taking his other hand out of his pocket, "and what I can give must be, in justice to my family, very limited. But Mrs. Percival, who has only four sons, and yourself who have none, are in very different circumstances. If he had had a father, the business might have been entered into more satisfactorily — but as you are his godfather, I hear ——"

"I never understood before, up to this minute," said Sir Edward, with great courtesy, "that it was the

duty of a godfather to endow his charge with two hundred a year."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Edward," said Mr. Penrose; "I am a plain man, and I treat things in a business way. I give my godchildren a silver mug, and feel my conscience clear: but if I had introduced a young man, not otherwise very eligible, to a handsome girl, who might have done a great deal better for herself, that would make a great difference in the responsibility. Winnie Seton is of very good family by her father's side, as you know, I suppose, better than I do; and of very good business connexions by her mother's; and her beauty is first-rate, — I don't think there can be any doubt about that. If she had been an ordinary pretty girl, I would not have said so much; but with all her advantages, I should say that any fair equivalent in the shape of a husband should be worth at least five thousand a year."

Mr. Penrose spoke with such seriousness that Sir Edward was awed out of his first feeling of amusement. He restrained his smile, and acknowledged the logic. "But I did not introduce him in any special way," he said. "If I can negotiate with Mrs. Percival for a more liberal allowance, I will do it. She has an estate of her own, and she is free to leave it to any of her sons: but Edward, I fear, has been rather unsatisfactory —"

"Ah, wild?" said Mr. Penrose: "all young men are alike for that. I think, on the whole, that it is you who should negotiate with the mother. You know her better than I do, and have known all about it from the beginning, and you could show her the state of the case better. If such a mad thing could be consented to by anybody in their senses, it must at least be ap-

parent that Winnie would bring twice as much as the other into the common stock. If she were with me in Liverpool she would not long be Winnie Seton; and you may trust me she should marry a man who was worthy of her," the rich uncle added, with a confirmatory nod of his head. When he spoke of a man who would be worthy of Winnie, he meant no sentimental fitness such as Aunt Agatha would have meant, had she said these words, nor was it even moral worth he was thinking of. What Mr. Penrose meant, was a man who would bring a fair equivalent in silver and gold to Winnie's beauty and youth, and he meant it most seriously, and could not but groan when he contemplated the possibility of so much valuable capital being thrown away.

And he felt that he had made a good impression when he went back to the Cottage. He seemed to himself to have secured Mrs. Percival's three hundred a-year, and even Sir Edward's more problematical gift to the young people; and he occupied the interval in thinking of a silver tea-service which had rather caught his fancy, in a shop window, and which he thought if his negotiations succeeded, he would give to his niece for a wedding present. If they did not succeed it would be a different question — for a young woman who married upon a captain's pay and a hundred a-year of her own, would have little occasion for a silver tea-service. So Mr. Penrose mused as he returned to the Cottage. Under the best of circumstances it was now evident that there could be nothing to "settle" upon Winnie. The mother and the friends might make up a little income, but as for capital — which after all was what Mr. Penrose prized most — there was none

in the whole matter, except that which Winnie had in her face and person, and was going to throw so lamentably away. Mr. Penrose could not but make some reflections on Aunt Agatha's feminine idiocy and the cruel heedlessness of Sir Edward, as he walked along the rural road. A girl who had so many advantages, whose husband, to be worthy of her, should have had five thousand a-year at the least, and something handsome to "settle" — and yet her natural guardians had suffered her to get engaged to a captain in a marching regiment, with only his pay! No wonder that Mr. Penrose was sad. But he went home with a sense that, painful as the position was, *he* had done his duty, at least.

This was how Winnie's marriage got itself accomplished notwithstanding all opposition. Captain Percival was the second of his mother's four sons, and consequently the natural heir of her personal fortune if he had not been "foolish," as she said; and the thought that it might be the saving of him, which was suggested by Sir Edward, was naturally a very moving argument. A beautiful young wife whom he was very fond of, and who was ready to enter with him into all the risks of life, — if that did not keep him right, what would? And after all he was only five-and-twenty, an age at which reformation was quite possible. So his friends thought, persuading themselves with natural sophistry that the influence of love and a self-willed girl of eighteen would do what all other inducements had failed to do; and as for *her* friends, they were so elated to see that in the eyes of Uncle Penrose the young man's faults bore only the most ordinary aspect, and counted for next to nothing,

that their misgivings all but disappeared, and their acceptance of the risk was almost enthusiastic. Sometimes indeed a momentary shadow would cross the mind of Aunt Agatha — sometimes a doubt would change Sir Edward's countenance — but then these two old people were believers in love, and besides had the faculty of believing what they wished to believe, which was a still more important circumstance. And Mary for her part had said her say. The momentary hope she had felt in Winnie's strength of character, and in her love — a hope which had opened her heart to speak to her sister — found but little to support it after that moment. She could not go on protesting, and making her presence a thorn in the flesh of the excited household; and if she felt throughout all a sense that the gulf was still there, though all these flowers had been strewed over it — a sense of the terrible risk which was so poorly counter-balanced by the vaguest and most doubtful of hopes — still Mary was aware that this might be simply the fault of her position, which led her to look upon everything with a less hopeful eye. She was the spectator, and she saw what was going on as the actors themselves could not be expected to see it. She saw Winnie's delight at the idea of freedom from all restraint — and she saw Percival's suppressed impatience of the anxious counsels addressed to him, and the look which Winnie and he exchanged on such occasions, as if assuring each other that in spite of all this they would take their own way. And then Mrs. Ochterlony's own relations with the bridegroom were not of a comfortable kind. He knew apparently by instinct that she was not his friend, and he approached her with a solemn

politeness under which Mary, perhaps over-sensitive on that point, felt that a secret sneer was concealed. And he made references to her Indian experiences, with a certain subtle implication of something in them which he knew and nobody else did — something which would be to Mrs. Ochterlony's injury should it be known — which awoke in Mary an irritation and exasperation which nothing else could have produced. She avoided him as much as it was possible to avoid him during the busy interval before the marriage, and he perceived it and thought it was fear, and the sneer that lay under his courtesy became more and more evident. He took to petting little Wilfrid with an evident consciousness of Mary's vexation and the painful effect it produced upon her; not Hugh nor Islay, who were of an age to be a man's plaything, but the baby, who was too young for any but a woman's interest; and Captain Percival was not the kind of man who is naturally fond of children. When she saw her little boy on her future brother-in-law's knee, Mary felt her heart contract with an involuntary shiver, of which she could have given no clear explanation. She did not know what she was afraid of, but she was afraid.

Perhaps it was a relief to them all when the marriage day arrived — which had to be shortly, for the regiment was ordered to Malta, and Captain Percival had already had all the leave he could ask for. Mr. Penrose's exertions had been crowned with such success that when he came to Winnie's wedding he brought her the silver tea-service which in his heart he had decided conditionally to give her as a marriage gift. Mrs. Percival had decided to settle two hundred and

fifty pounds a-year upon her son, which was very near Mr. Penrose's mark; and Sir Edward, after long pondering upon the subject, and a half-amused, half-serious, consideration of Winnie's capital which was being thrown away, had made up his mind to a still greater effort. He gave the young man in present possession what he had left him in his will, which was a sum of five thousand pounds — a little fortune to the young soldier. "You might have been my son, my boy, if your mother and I could have made up our minds," the old baronet said, with a momentary weakness; though if anybody else had suggested such an idea no doubt Sir Edward would have said, "Heaven forbid!" And Mr. Penrose pounced upon it and had it settled upon Winnie, and was happy, though the bridegroom resisted a little. After that there could be no doubt about the tea-service. "If you should ever be placed in Mary's position you will have something to fall back upon," Uncle Penrose said; "or even if you should not get on together, you know." It was not a large sum, but the difficulty there had been about getting it, and the pleasant sense that it was wholly owing to his own exertions, made it sweet to the man of capital, and he gave his niece his blessing and the tea-service with a full heart.

As for Winnie, she was radiant in her glow of beauty and happiness on that momentous day. A thunder-shower of sudden tears when she signed the register, and another when she was taking leave of Aunt Agatha, was all that occurred to overcloud her brightness; and even these did not overcloud her, but were in harmony — hot, violent, and sudden as they were — with the passionate happiness and emancipation

of the married girl. She kissed over and over again her tender guardian — who for her part sat speechless and desolate to see her child go away, weeping with a silent anguish which could not find any words — and dropped that sudden shower over Aunt Agatha's gown; but a moment after threw back the veil which had fallen over her face, and looked back from the carriage window upon them in a flush of joy, and pride, and conscious freedom, which, had no other sentiments been called for at the moment, it would have done one's heart good to see. She was so happy that she could not cry, nor be sentimental, nor think of broken links, as she said — and why should she pretend to be sad about parting? Which was very true, no doubt, from Winnie's point of view. And there was not the vestige of a cloud about when she waved her hand to them for the last time as she drove away. She was going away to the world and life, to see everything and enjoy everything, and have her day. Why should not she show her delight? While poor old Aunt Agatha, whose day was so long over, fell back into Mary's arms, who was standing beside her, and felt that now at last and finally, her heart was broken, and the joy of her life gone. Was it not simply the course of nature and the way of the world?

CHAPTER XXII.

THERE followed after this a time of such tranquillity as had never yet entered into Mrs. Ochterlony's life. Mary had known joy, and she had known sorrow, as people do to whom life comes with full hands, giving and taking; but it had always been life, busy and personal, which left her little leisure for anything beyond the quickly recurring duties of the hour and day. She had had no time to watch the current how it flowed, being as it were part of it, and going along with it in its ceaseless course. But now all this was changed. After Winnie's marriage a sudden tranquillity fell upon the ladies in the Cottage. Life had gone on and left them; they were no longer going with the tide, but standing by upon the bank watching it. They were not unhappy, nor was their existence sad, — for the three boys were world enough to satisfy the two women and keep them occupied and cheerful; and when the children were asleep, Aunt Agatha and her niece were, as people say, company for each other, and talked over their work as they sat by the evening lamp, or in the twilight garden, which was always so green and so sweet, — and were content, or more than content; but still sometimes Mrs. Ochterlony would bethink herself, and it would seem as a dream to her that she, too, had once taken her part with the others and gone with the stream, and suffered and tasted sudden joys, and been wife. Was it so? Or had she n Aunt Agatha by the little river t

day like another under the self-same trees? This strange sense of unreality in the past turned her giddy by times, and made her head swim and the world to go round and round; but, to be sure, she never spoke of these sensations, and life continued, and the boys grew, and everything went very well at Kirtell-side.

Everything went so well that Aunt Agatha many a day pitied the poor people who were out in the world, or the young men who set out from the parish to begin their career, and would say, "Oh, if they but knew how much better everybody is at home!" Mary was younger, and perhaps she was not quite of the same mind; but still it was peace that had fallen upon her and was wrapping her all round like a garment. There was the same quiet routine every day; the same things to do, the same places to walk to, the same faces to see. Nothing unforeseen ever arrived to break the calm. When Hugh was old enough to begin serious lessons, a curate turned up in the course of nature who took pupils, and to whom Islay, too, went by-and-by, and even little Wilfrid, who was always delicate. The boys went to him with shining morning faces, and came back growing louder and stronger, and, as Peggy said, more "stirring" every day. And Sir Edward made his almost daily visit, and let a thin and gentle echo of the out-of-door din into the Cottage quiet. He told them in his mild way what was going on, and talked about the news in the papers, and about the books reviewed, and about the occasional heavenly visitant in the shape of a new publication that found its way to Kirtell-side. There were few magazines then, and no cheap ones, and a single *Blackwood* did for a good many families. Sir Edward himself, who

had been always considered intellectual, took in the *Edinburgh* all for himself, and lent it to his neighbours; but then it could not be expected that many people in a district could be so magnificent as that. When the Curate, on the other hand, came to tea (he was not the sort of man, as Aunt Agatha said, that one would think of making a dinner for), it was all about the parish that he talked; and as Mrs. Ochterlony was a perverse woman in her way, and had her own ideas about her poor neighbours, such conversation was not so interesting to her as it might have been. But it was in this sort of way that she spent the next ten or twelve years of her life.

As for Winnie, she was having her day, as she had said, and was, it is to be supposed, enjoying it. She wrote letters regularly and diligently, which is one point in which a woman, however little elevated she may be above her masculine companion in other respects, always has the better of him. And she possessed a true feminine gift which ought also to be put in the compensating scale against those female drawbacks which are so often insisted upon. Sometimes she was ill-tempered, sometimes bitter in her letters, for the honeymoon happiness naturally did not last for ever; but, whatever mood Winnie might be in, she always threw an unconscious halo of interest around herself when she wrote. It was, as everybody might see, an instinctive and unpremeditated act, but it was successful to the highest extent. Whether she described her triumphs or her disappointments, her husband's kindness or his carelessness, their extravagant living or their want of money, Winnie herself, in the foreground of the picture, was always charmingly,

and sometimes touchingly, posed. A word or two did it, and it was done to perfection; and the course of her history thus traced was followed by Aunt Agatha with an unfailing enthusiasm. She herself went through it all in the person of her favourite, and Mary connected herself with a vague but still fairer future in the persons of her boys. And thus the peaceful existence went on day by day, with nothing more serious to trouble it than a transitory childish ailment, or a passing rumour that the Percivals were "going too fast," or did not "get on," — clouds which only floated mistily and momentarily about the horizon, and never came down to trouble the quiet waters. It was a time which left no record, and which by times felt languid and lingering to the younger woman, who was still too young to be altogether satisfied with so dead a calm in the middle of her existence; but still, perhaps, it was, on the whole, the happiest time of Mary's life.

This halcyon time lasted until the boys were so far grown up as to bring the disturbing plans and speculations of their beginning life into the household calm. It lasted until Islay was sixteen and ready to pass his examination for Woolwich, the long-headed boy having fixed his affections upon scientific soldiership in a way which was slightly disappointing to his mother, who, as was natural, had thought him capable of a more learned profession. It roused the Cottage into something like a new stage of existence to think of and prepare for the entry of its nursling into that great vague unseen sphere which Aunt Agatha called the world. But, after all, it was not Islay who was the troublesome member of the family. He had fixed his thoughts upon his chosen profession almost as soon as

he knew what was meant by his father's sword, which had hung in Mrs. Ochterlony's room from his earliest recollection; and though there might be a little anxiety about how he would succeed at his examination, and how he would get on when he left home, still Islay was so steady that no one felt any alarm or absolute disquiet about him.

But it was rather different with Hugh. Hugh was supposed to be his uncle's heir, and received as such wherever he went, with perhaps more enthusiasm than might have fallen to his share merely as Mary's son. He was heir presumptive, recognised to a certain extent at Earlston itself as elsewhere in that capacity; and yet Mr. Ochterlony had not, so far as anybody was aware, made any distinct decision, and might still alter his mind, and, indeed, was not too old to marry and have heirs of his own, which was a view of the subject chiefly taken by Aunt Agatha. And, to aggravate the position, Hugh was far from being a boy of fixed resolutions, like his brother. He was one of the troublesome people, who have no very particular bias. He liked everything that was pleasant. He was not idle, nor had he any evil tendencies; he was fond of literature in a way, and at the same time fond of shooting and hunting, and all the occupations and amusements of a country life. Public opinion in the country-side proclaimed him one of the nicest young fellows going; and if he had been Francis Ochterlony's son, and indisputably the heir of Earlston, Hugh would have been as satisfactory a specimen of a budding country gentleman as could have been found. But the crook in his lot was, that he was the heir presumptive, and at the same time was generous and proud and

high-spirited, and not the kind of nature which could lie in wait for another man's place, or build his fortunes upon another man's generosity. His own opinion, no doubt, was that he had a right to Earlston; but he was far too great a Quixote, too highly fantastical in youthful pride and independence, to permit any one to say that it was his uncle's duty to provide for him. And withal, he did not himself know what manner of life to take up, or what to do. He would have made a good soldier, or a good farmer, different though the two things are; and would have filled, as well as most people, almost any other practical position which Providence or circumstances had set clearly before him. But no intuitive perception of what he was most fit for was in him to enlighten his way; and at the same time he began to be highly impatient, being eighteen, and a man as he thought, of waiting and doing nothing and living at home.

"If we could but have sent him to Oxford," Aunt Agatha said; "if I had the means!" — but it is very doubtful whether she ever could have had the means; and of late Aunt Agatha too had been disturbed in her quiet. Her letters to Winnie had begun to convey enclosures of which she did not speak much, even to Mrs. Ocherlony, but which were dead against any such possibility for Hugh.

"If I had been brought up at school where I might have got a scholarship, or something," said Hugh; "but I don't know why I should want to go to Oxford. We must send Will if we can, mother; he has the brains for it. Oxford is too grand an idea for me —"

"Not if you are to have Earlston, Hugh," said his mother.

"I wish Earlston was at the bottom of the sea," cried the poor boy; "but for Earlston, one would have known what one was good for. I wish my uncle would make up his mind and found a hospital with it, or marry, as Aunt Agatha says —"

"He will never marry," said Mary; "he was a great deal older than your father; he is quite an old man."

"Indeed, Mary, he is not old at all, for a man," said Aunt Agatha, with eagerness. "Ladies are so different. He might get a very nice wife yet, and children, for anything any one could tell. Not too young, you know — I think it would be a great pity if he were to marry anybody too young; but a nice person, of perhaps forty or so," said Aunt Agatha; and she rounded off her sentence with a soft little sigh.

"He will never marry, I am sure," said Mary, almost with indignation; for, not to speak of the injustice to Hugh, it sounded like an imputation upon her brother-in-law, who was sober-minded, and not thinking of anything so foolish; not to say that his heart was with his marble Venus, and he was indifferent to any other love.

"Well, if you think so, my dear —" said Miss Seton; and a faint colour rose upon her soft old cheek. She thought Mary's meaning was, that after his behaviour to herself, which was not exactly what people expected, he was not likely to entertain another affection; which was probably as true as any other theorie of Mr. Ochterlony's conduct. Aunt Agatha thought this was Mary's meaning, and it pleased her. It was an old

story, but still she remembered it so well, that it was pleasant to think *he* had not forgotten. But this, to be sure, had very little to do with Hugh.

"I wish he would marry," said his heir presumtive, "or put one out of pain one way or another. Things can't go on for ever like this. Islay is only sixteen, and he is starting already; and here am I eighteen past, and good for nothing. You would not like me to be a useless wretch all my life?" said Hugh, severely, turning round upon his mother, who was not prepared for such an address; but Hugh, of all the boys, was the one most like his father, and had the Major's "way."

"No," cried Mary, a little alarmed, "anything but that. I still think you might wait a little, and see what your uncle means. You are not so very old. Well, my dear boy! don't be impatient; tell me what you wish to do."

But this was exactly what Hugh could not tell. "If there had been no Earlston in the question, one would have known," he said. "It is very hard upon a fellow to be another man's nephew. I think the best thing I could do would be to ignore Earlston altogether, and go in for — anything I could make my own living by. There's Islay has had the first chance —"

"My dear, one is surely enough in a family to be a soldier," said Aunt Agatha, "if you would consider your poor mamma's feelings and mine; but I never thought, for my part, that *that* was the thing for Islay, with his long head. He had always such a very peculiar head. When he was a child, you know, Mary, we never could get a child's hat to fit him. Now, I

think, if Hugh had gone into a very nice regiment, and Islay had studied for something —"

"Do you think he will have no study to do, going in for the Engineers?" said Hugh, indignantly. "I am not envious of Islay. I know he is the best fellow among us; but, at the same time — The thing for me would be to go to Australia or New Zealand, where one does not need to be good for anything in particular. That is my case," said the disconsolate youth; and out of the depths, if not of his soul, at least of his capacious chest, there came a profound, almost despairing sigh.

"Oh, Hugh, my darling boy! you cannot mean to break all our hearts," cried Aunt Agatha.

It was just what poor Hugh meant to do, for the moment, at least; and he sat with his head down and despair in his face, with a look which went to Mary's heart, and brought the tears to her eyes, but a smile to her lips. He was so like his father; and Mrs. Ochterlony knew that he would not, in this way, at least, break her heart.

"Would you like to go to Uncle Penrose?" she said; to which Hugh replied with a vehement shake of his head. "Would you like to go into Mr. Allonby's office? You know he spoke of wanting an articled pupil. Would you think of that proposal Mr. Mortare, the architect, made us? — don't shake your head off, Hugh; or ask Sir Edward to let you help old Sanders — or — or — Would you *really* like to be a soldier, like your brother?" said Mary, at her wits' end; for after this, with their limited opportunities, there seemed no further suggestion to make.

"I must do something, mother," said Hugh, and

he rose up with another sigh; "but I don't want to vex you," he added, coming up and putting his arms round her with that admiring fondness which is perhaps sweeter to a woman from her son than even from her lover; and then, his mind being relieved, he had no objection to change the conversation. "I promised to look at the young colts, and tell Sir Edward what I thought of them," he suddenly said, looking up at Mary with a cloudy, doubtful look — afraid of being laughed at, and yet himself ready to laugh — such as is not unusual upon a boy's face. Mrs. Ochterlony did not feel in the least inclined for laughter, though she smiled upon her boy; and when he went away, a look of anxiety came to her face, though it was not anything like the tragical anxiety which contracted Aunt Agatha's gentle countenance. She took up her work again, which was more than Miss Seton could do. The boys were no longer children, and life was coming back to her with their growing years. Life which is not peace, but more like a sword.

"My dear love, something must be done," said Aunt Agatha. "Australia or New Zealand, and for a boy of his expectations! Mary, something must be done."

"Yes," said Mary. "I must go and consult my brother-in-law about it, and see what he thinks best. But as for New Zealand or Australia, Aunt Agatha —"

"Do you think it will be *nice*, Mary?" said Miss Seton, with a soft blush like a girl's. "It will be like asking him, you know, what he means; it will be like saying he ought to provide —"

"He said Hugh was to be his heir," said Mary, "and I believe he meant what he said; at all events

it would be wrong to do anything without consulting him, for he has always been very kind."

These words threw Aunt Agatha into a flutter which she could not conceal. "It may be very well to consult him," she said; "but rather than let him think we are asking his help —— And then, how can you see him, Mary? I am afraid it would be — awkward, to say the least, to ask him here ——"

"I will go to Earlston to-morrow," said Mary. "I made up my mind while Hugh was talking. After Islay has gone, it will be worse for Hugh. Will is so much younger, poor boy."

"Will," said Aunt Agatha, sighing. "Oh, Mary, if they had only been girls! we could have brought them up without any assistance, and no bother about professions or things. When you have settled Hugh and Islay, there will be Will to open it up again; and they will all leave us, after all. Oh, Mary, my dear love, if they had been but girls!"

"Yes, but they are not girls," said Mrs. Ochterlony, with a half smile; and then she too sighed. She was glad her boys were boys, and had more confidence in them, and Providence and life, than Aunt Agatha had. But she was not glad to think that her boys must leave her, and that she had no daughter to share her household life. The cloud which sat on Aunt Agatha's careful brow came over her, too, for the moment, and dimmed her eyes, and made her heart ache. "They came into the world for God's uses and not for ours" she said, recovering herself, "and though they are boys, we must not keep them unhappy. I will go over to Earlston to-morrow by the early train.

"If you think it right," said Miss Seton: but it

was not cordially spoken. Aunt Agatha was very proud and sensitive in her way. She was the kind of woman to get into misunderstandings, and shun explanations, as much as if she had been a woman in a novel. She was as ready to take up a mistaken idea, and as determined not to see her mistake, as if she had been a heroine forced thereto by the exigencies of three volumes. Miss Seton had never come to the third volume herself; she thought it more dignified for her own part to remain in the complications and perplexities of the second; and it struck her that it was indelicate of Mary thus to open the subject, and lead Francis Ochterlony on, as it were, to declare his mind.

The question was quite a different one so far as Mary was concerned, to whom Francis Ochterlony had never stood in the position of a lover, nor was the subject of any delicate difficulties. With her it was a straightforward piece of business enough to consult her brother-in-law, who was the natural guardian of her sons, and who had always been well disposed towards them, especially while they kept at a safe distance. Islay was the only one who had done any practical harm at Earlston, and Mr. Ochterlony had forgiven and, it is to be hoped, forgotten the downfall of the rococo chair. If she had had nothing more important to trouble her than a consultation so innocent! Though, to tell the truth, Mary did not feel that she had a great deal to trouble her, even with the uncertainty of Hugh's future upon her hands. Even if his uncle were to contemplate anything so absurd as marriage or the founding of a hospital, Hugh could still make his own way in the world, as his brothers would have to do, and as his father had done before him. And Mrs.

Ochterlony was not even overwhelmed by consideration of the very different characters of the boys, nor of the immense responsibility, nor of any of the awful thoughts with which widow-mothers are supposed to be overwhelmed. They were all well, God bless them; all honest and true, healthful and affectionate. Hugh had his crotchets and figéty ways, but so had his father, and perhaps Mary loved her boy the better for them; and Wilfrid was a strange boy, but then he had always been strange, and it came natural to him. No doubt there might be undeveloped depths in both, of which their mother as yet knew nothing; but in the meantime Mary, like other mothers, took things as she saw them, and was proud of her sons, and had no disturbing fears. As for Islay, he was steady as a rock, and almost as strong, and did the heart good to behold, and even the weakest woman might have taken heart to trust him, whatever might be the temptations and terrors of "the world." Mary had that composure which belongs to the better side of experience, as much as suspicion and distrust belong to its darker side. The world did not alarm her as it did Aunt Agatha; neither did Mr. Ochterlony alarm her, whose sentiments ought at least to be known by this time, and whose counsel she sought with no artful intention of drawing him out, but with an honest desire to have the matter settled one way or another. This was how the interval of calm passed away, and the new generation brought back a new and fuller life.

It was not all pleasure with which Mary rose next morning to go upon her mission to Earlston; but it was with a feeling of resurrection, a sense that she lay no longer ashore, but that the tide was once more

creeping about her stranded boat, and the wind wooing the idle sail. There might be storms awaiting her upon the sea; storm and shipwreck and loss of all things lay in the future; possible for her boys as for others, certain for some; but that pricking, tingling thrill of danger and pain gave a certain vitality to the stir of life renewed. Peace is sweet, and there are times when the soul sighs for it; but life is sweeter. And this is how Mary, in her mother's anxiety, — with all the possibilities of fate to affright her, if they could, yet not without a novel sense of exhilaration, her heart beating more strongly, her pulse fuller, her eye brighter, — went forth to open the door for her boy into his own personal and individual career.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was a cheerful summer morning when Mary set out on her visit to her brother-in-law. She had said nothing to her boys about it, for Hugh was fantastical, like Aunt Agatha, and would have denounced her intention as an expedient to make his uncle provide for him. Hugh had gone out to attend to some of the many little businesses he had in hand for Sir Edward; and Islay was working in his own room preparing for the "coach," to whom he was going in a few days; and Wilfrid, or Will, as everybody called him, was with his curate-tutor. The Cottage held its placid place upon the high bank of Kirtell, shining through its trees in a purple cloud of roses, and listening in the sun to that everlasting quiet voice that

sung in its ear, summer and winter, the little river's changeful yet changeless song. It looked like a place to which no changes could ever come; calm people in the stillness of age, souls at rest, little children, were the kind of people to live in it; and the stir and quickening of pleasurable pain which Mary felt in her own veins, — the sense of new life and movement about her, — felt out of place with the quiet house. Aunt Agatha was out of sight, ordering her household affairs; and the drawing-room was silent and deserted as a fairy palace, full of a thousand signs of habitation, but without a single tenant audible or visible, except the roses that clambered about the open windows, and the bee that went in and made a confused investigation, and came out again none the wiser. An odd sense of the contrast struck Mrs. Ochterlony; but a little while before, her soul had been in unison with the calm of the place, and she had thought nothing of it; now she had woke up out of that fair chamber turned to the sunrising, the name of which is Peace, and had stepped back into life, and felt the tingle and thrill of resurrection. And an unconscious smile came on her face as she looked back. To think that out of that silence and sunshine should pour out such a tide of new strength and vigour — and that henceforth hearts should leap with eagerness and wistfulness under that roof, and perhaps grow wild with joy, or perhaps, God knows, break with anguish, as news came good or evil! She had been but half alive so long, that the sense of living was sweet.

It was a moment to call forth many thoughts and recollections, but the fact was that she did not have time to entertain them. There happened to her one

of those curious coincidences which occur so often, and which it is so difficult to account for. Long before she reached the little station, a tall figure broke the long vacant line of the dusty country road, a figure which Mary felt at once to be that of a stranger, and yet one she seemed to recognise. She could not believe her eyes, nor think it was anything but the association of ideas which misled her, and laughed at her own fantastic imagination as she went on. But nevertheless it is true that it was her brother-in-law himself who met her, long before she reached the railway by which she had meant to go to him. Her appearance struck him too, it was evident, with a little surprise; but yet she was at home, and might have been going anywhere; whereas the strange fact of his coming required a more elaborate explanation than he had it in his power to give.

"I do not know exactly what put it into my head," said Mr. Ochterlony; "perhaps some old work of mine which turned up the other day, and which I was doing when you were with me. I thought I would come over and have a talk with you about your boy."

"It is very strange," said Mary, "for this very morning I had made up my mind to come to you, to consult you. It must be some kind of magnetism, I suppose."

"Indeed, I can't say; I have never studied the natural sciences," said Mr. Ochterlony, with gravity. "I have had a very distinguished visitor lately: a man whose powers are as much above the common mind as his information is — Dr. Franklin, whose name of

course you have heard — a man of European reputation."

"Yes," said Mary, doubtfully, feeling very guilty and ignorant, for to tell the truth she had never heard of Dr. Franklin; but her brother-in-law perceived her ignorance, and explained in a kind of compassionate way —

"He is about the greatest numismatist we have in England," said Mr. Ochterlony, "and somehow my little monograph upon primitive art in Iceland came to be talked of. I have never completed it, though Franklin expressed himself much interested — and I think that's how it was suggested to my mind to come and see you to-day."

"I am very glad," said Mary, "I wanted so much to have your advice. Hugh is almost a man now —"

"A man!" said Mr. Ochterlony, with a smile; "I don't see how that is possible. I hope he is not so unruly as he used to be; but you are as young as ever, and I don't see how your children can be men."

And oddly enough, just at that moment, Hugh himself made his appearance, making his way by a cross road down to the river, with his basket over his shoulder, and his fishing-rod. He was taller than his uncle, though Mr. Ochterlony was tall; and big besides, with large, mighty, not perfectly developed limbs, swinging a little loosely upon their hinges like the limbs of a young Newfoundland or baby lion. His face was still smooth as a girl's, and fair, with downy cheeks and his mother's eyes, and that pucker in his forehead which Francis Ochterlony had known of old in the countenance of another Hugh. Mary did not say anything, but she stopped short before her boy,

and put her hand on his shoulder, and looked at his uncle with a smile, appealing to him with her proud eyes and beaming face, if this was not almost a man. As for Mr. Ochterlony, he gave a great start and said, "God bless us!" under his breath, and was otherwise speechless for the moment. He had been thinking of a boy, grown no doubt, but still within the limits of childhood; and lo, it was an unknown human creature that faced him, with a will and thoughts of his own, like its father and mother, and yet like nobody but itself. Hugh, for his part, looked with very curious eyes at the stranger, and dimly recognised him, and grew shamefaced and a little fidgety, as was natural to the boy.

"You see how he has grown," said Mary, who, being the triumphant one among the three, was the first to recover herself. "You do not think him a child now? It is your uncle, Hugh, come to see us. It is very kind of him — but of course you knew who he was."

"I am very glad to see my uncle," said Hugh, with eager shyness. "Yes, I knew. You are like my father's picture, sir; — and your own that we have at the Cottage — and Islay a little. I knew it was you."

And then they all walked on in silence; for Mr. Ochterlony was more moved by this sudden encounter than he cared to acknowledge; and Mary, too, for the moment, being a sympathetic woman, saw her boy with his uncle's eyes, and saw what the recollections were that sprang up at sight of him. She told Hugh to go on and do his duty, and send home some trout for dinner; and, thus dismissing him, guided her un-

looked-for visitor to the Cottage. He knew the way as well as she did, which increased the embarrassment of the situation. Mary saw only the stiles and the fields, and the trees that over-topped the hedges, familiar objects that met her eyes every day; but Francis Ochterlony saw many a past day and past imagination of his own life, and seemed to walk over his own ashes as he went on. And that was Hugh! — Hugh, not his brother, but his nephew and heir, the representative of the Ochterlony's, occupying the position which his own son should have occupied. Mr. Ochterlony had not calculated on the progress of time, and he was startled and even touched, and felt wonderingly — what it is so difficult for a man to feel — that his own course was no longer of much importance to anybody, and that here was his successor. The thought made him giddy, just as Mary's wondering sense of the unreality of her own independent life, and everlastingness of her stay at the Cottage, had made her; but yet in a different way. For perhaps Francis Ochterlony had never actually realized before that most things were over for him, and that his heir stood ready and waiting for the end of his life.

There was still something of this sense of giddiness in his mind when he followed Mary through the open window into the silent drawing-room where nobody was. Perhaps he had not behaved just as he ought to have done to Agatha Seton; and the recollection of a great many things that had happened, and that had not happened, came back upon him as he wound his way with some confusion through the roses. He was half ashamed to go in, like a familiar friend, through the window. Of all men in the world, he had the least right to such

a privilege of intimacy. He ought to have gone to the door in a formal way and sent in his card, and been admitted only if Miss Seton pleased; and yet here he was, in the very sanctuary of her life, invited to sit down as it were by her side, led in by the younger generation, which could not but smile at the thought of any sort of sentiment between the old woman and the old man. For indeed Mary, though she was not young, was smiling softly within herself at the idea. She had no sort of sympathy with Mr. Ochterlony's delicate embarrassment, though she was woman enough to hurry away to seek her aunt and prepare her for the meeting, and shield the ancient maiden in the first flutter of her feelings. Thus the master of Earlston was left alone in the Cottage, with leisure to look round and recognise the identity of the place, and see all its differences, and become aware of its pleasant air of habitation, and all the signs of daily use and wont which had no existence in his own house. All this confused him, and put him at a great disadvantage. The probabilities were that Agatha Seton would not have been a bit the happier had she been mistress of Earlston. Indeed the Cottage had so taken her stamp that it was impossible for anybody, whose acquaintance with her was less than thirty years old, to imagine her with any other surroundings. But Francis Ochterlony had known her for more than thirty years, and naturally he felt that he himself was a possession worth a woman's while, and that he had, so to speak, defrauded her of so important a piece of property; and he was penitent and ashamed of himself. Perhaps too his own heart was moved a little by the sense of something lost. His own house might have borne this sunny air of home;

instead of his brother Hugh's son, there might have been a boy of his own to inherit Earlston; and looking back at it quietly in this cottage drawing-room, Francis Ochterlony's life seemed to him something very like a mistake. He was not a hard-hearted man, and the inference he drew from this conclusion was very much in his nephew's favour. Hugh's boy was almost a man, and there was no doubt that he was the natural heir, and that it was to him everything ought to come. Instead of thinking of marrying, as Aunt Agatha imagined, or founding a hospital, or making any other ridiculous use of his money, his mind, in its softened and compunctious state, turned to its natural and obvious duty. "Let there be no mistake, at least, about the boy," he said to himself. "Let him have all that is good for him, and all that can best fit him for his position;" for, Heaven be praised, there was at least no doubt about Hugh, or question as to his being the lawful and inevitable heir.

It was this process of reasoning, or rather of feeling, that made Mrs. Ochterlony so entirely satisfied with her brother-in-law when she returned (still alone, for Miss Seton was not equal to the exertion all at once, and naturally there was something extra to be ordered for dinner), and began to talk to their uncle about the children.

"There has been no difficulty about Islay," she said; "he always knew what he wanted, and set his heart at once on his profession; but Hugh has no such decided turn. It was very kind what you said when you wrote — but I — don't think it is good for the boy to be idle. Whatever you might think it right to

arrange afterwards, I think he should have something to do ——"

"I did not think he had been so old," said Mr. Ochterlony, almost apologetically. "Time does not leave much mark of its progress at Earlston. Something to do? I thought what a young fellow of his age enjoyed most was amusing himself. What would he like to do?"

"He does not know," said Mary, a little abashed; "that is why I wanted so much to consult you. I suppose people have talked to him of — of what you might do for him; but he cannot bear the thought of hanging, as it were, on your charity ——"

"Charity!" said Mr. Ochterlony, "it is not charity, it is right and nature. I hope he is not one of those touchy sort of boys that think kindness an injury. My poor brother Hugh was always fidgety ——"

"Oh no, it is not that," said the anxious mother, "only he is afraid that you might think he was calculating upon you; as if you were obliged to provide for him ——"

"And so I am obliged to provide for him," said Mr. Ochterlony, "as much as I should be obliged to provide for my own son, if I had one. We must find him something to do. Perhaps I ought to have thought of it sooner. What has been done about his education? What school has he been at? Is he fit for the University? Earlston will be a better property in his days than it was when I was young," added the uncle with a natural sigh. If he had but provided himself with an heir of his own, perhaps it would have been less troublesome on the whole. "I would send him to Ox-

ford, which would be the best way of employing him; but is he fit for it? Where has he been to school?"

Upon which Mary, with some confusion, murmured something about the curate, and felt for the first time as if she had been indifferent to the education of her boy.

"The curate!" said Mr. Ochterlony; and he gave a little shrug of his shoulders, as if that was a very poor security for Hugh's scholarship.

"He has done very well with all his pupils," said Mary, "and Mr. Cramer, to whom Islay is going, was very much satisfied——"

"I forget where Islay was going?" said Mr. Ochterlony, inquiringly.

"Mr. Cramer lives near Kendal," said Mary; "he was very highly recommended; and we thought the boy could come home for Sunday——"

Mr. Ochterlony shook his head, though still in a patronizing and friendly way. "I am not sure that it is good to choose a tutor because the boy can come home on Sunday," he said, "nor send them to the curate that you may keep them with yourself. I know it is the way with ladies; but it would have been better, I think, to have sent them to school."

Mrs. Ochterlony was confounded by this verdict against her. All at once her eyes seemed to be opened, and she saw herself a selfish mother keeping her boys at her own apron-strings. She had not time to think of such poor arguments in her favour as want of means, or her own perfectly good intentions. She was silent, struck dumb by this unthought-of condemnation; but just then a champion she had not thought of appeared in her defence.

"Mr. Small did very well for Hugh," said a voice at the window; "he is a very good tutor so far as he goes. He did very well for Hugh — and Islay too," said the new-comer, who came in at the window as he spoke with a bundle of books under his arm. The interruption was so unexpected that Mr. Ochterlony, being quite unused to the easy entrance of strangers at the window, and into the conversation, started up alarmed and a little angry. But, after all, there was nothing to be angry about.

"It is only Will," said Mary. "Wilfrid, it is your uncle, whom you have not seen for so long. This was my baby," she added, turning to her brother-in-law, with an anxious smile — for Wilfrid was a boy who puzzled strangers, and was not by any means so sure to make a good impression as the others were. Mr. Ochterlony shook hands with the new-comer, but he surveyed him a little doubtfully. He was about thirteen, a long boy, with big wrists and ankles visible, and signs of rapid growth. His face did not speak of country air and fare and outdoor life and healthful occupation like his brother's, but was pale and full of fancies and notions which he did not reveal to everybody. He came in and put down his books and threw himself into a chair with none of his elder brother's shamefacedness. Will, for his part, was not given to blushing. He knew nothing of his uncle's visit, but he took it quietly as a thing of course, and prepared to take part in the conversation, whatever its subject might be.

"Mr. Small has done very well for them all," said Mary, taking heart again; "he has always done very well with his pupils. Mr. Cramer was very much sa-

tisfied with the progress Islay had made; and as for Hugh ——"

"He is quite clever enough for Hugh," said Will, with the same steady voice.

Mr. Ochterlony, though he was generally so grave, was amused. "My young friend, are you sure you are a judge?" he said. "Perhaps he is not clever enough for Wilfrid — is that what you meant to say?"

"It is not so much the being clever," said the boy. "I think he has taught me as much as he knows, so it is not his fault. I wish we had been sent to school; but Hugh is all right. He knows as much as he wants to know, I suppose; and as for Islay, his is technical," the young critic added with a certain quiet superiority. Will, poor fellow, was the clever one of the family, and somehow he had found it out.

Mr. Ochterlony looked at this new representative of his race with a little alarm. Perhaps he was thinking that, on the whole, it was as well not to have boys; and then, as much from inability to carry on the conversation as from interest in his own particular subject, he returned to Hugh.

"The best plan, perhaps, will be for Hugh to go back with me to Earlston; that is, if it is not disagreeable to you," he said, in his old-fashioned, polite way. "I have been too long thinking about it, and his position must be made distinct. Oxford would be the best; that would be good for him in every way. And I think afterwards he might pay a little attention to the estate. I never could have believed that babies grew into boys, and boys to men, so quickly. Why, it can barely be a few years since — Ah!" Mr. Ochterlony got up very precipitately from his chair. It was Aunt

Agatha who had come into the room, with her white hair smoothed under her white cap, and her pretty Shetland shawl over her shoulders. Then he perceived that it was more than a few years since he had last seen her. The difference was more to him than the difference in the boys, who were creatures that sprang up nobody knew how, and were never to be relied upon. That summer morning when she came to Earlston to claim her niece, Miss Seton had been old; but it was a different kind of age from that which sat upon her soft countenance now. Francis Ochterlony had not for many a year asked himself in his seclusion whether he was old or young. His occupations were all tranquil, and he had not felt himself unable for them; but if Agatha Seton was like this, surely then it must indeed be time to think of an heir.

The day passed with a curious speed and yet tardiness, such as is peculiar to days of excitement. When they were not talking of the boys, nobody could tell what to talk about. Once or twice, indeed, Mr. Ochterlony began to speak of the Numismatic Society, or the excavations at Nineveh, or some other cognate subject; but he always came to a standstill when he caught Aunt Agatha's soft eyes wondering over him. They had not talked about excavations, nor numismatics either, the last time he had been here; and there was no human link between that time and this, except the boys, of whom they could all talk; and to this theme accordingly everybody returned. Hugh came in audibly, leaving his basket at the kitchen door as he passed, and Islay, with his long head and his deep eyes, came down from his room where he was working, and Will kept his seat in the big Indian

chair in the corner, where he dangled his long legs, and listened. Everybody felt the importance of the moment, and was dreadfully serious, even when lighter conversation was attempted. To show the boys in their best light, each of the three, and yet not so to show them as if anybody calculated upon, or was eager about the uncle's patronage; to give him an idea of their different characters, without any suspicion of "showing off," which the lads could not have tolerated; all this was very difficult to the two anxious women, and required such an amount of mental effort as made it hard to be anything but serious. Fortunately, the boys themselves were a little excited by the novelty of such a visitor, and curious about their uncle, not knowing what his appearance might mean. Hugh flushed into a singular mixture of exaltation, and suspicion, and surprise, when Mr. Ochterlony invited him to Earlston; and looked at his mother with momentary distrust, to see if by any means she had sought the invitation; and Wilfrid sat and dangled his long legs, and listened, with an odd appreciation of the fact that the visit was to Hugh, and not to himself, or any more important member of the family. As for Islay, he was always a good fellow, and like himself; and his way was clear before him, and admitted of no hopes or fears except as to whether or not he should succeed at his examination, which was a matter about which he had himself no very serious doubts, though he said little about it; and perhaps on the whole it was Islay, who was quite indifferent, whom Mr. Ochterlony would have fixed his choice upon, had he been at liberty to choose.

When the visitor departed, which he did the same

evening, the household drew a long breath; everybody was relieved, from Peggy in the kitchen, whose idea was that the man was "looking after our Miss Agatha again," down to Will, who had now leisure and occasion to express his sentiments on the subject. Islay went back to his work, to make up for the lost day, having only a moderate and temporary interest in his uncle. It was the elder and the younger who alone felt themselves concerned. As for Hugh, the world seemed to have altered in these few hours; Mr. Ochterlony had not said a great deal to him; but what he said had been said as a man speaks who means and has the power to carry out his words; and the vague heirship had become all of a sudden the realest fact in existence, and a thing which could not be, and never could have been, otherwise. And he was slightly giddy, and his head swam with the sudden elevation. But as for Wilfrid, what had he to do with it, any more than any other member of the family? though he was always a strange boy, and there never was any reckoning what he might do or say.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Will's room was a small room opening from his mother's, which would have been her dressing-room had she wanted such a luxury; and when Mrs. Ochterlony went up-stairs late that night, after a long talk with Aunt Agatha, she found the light still burning in the little room, and her boy seated, with his jacket and his shoes off, on the floor, in a brown study. He was

sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin in a patch of moonlight that shone in from the window. The moonlight made him look ghastly, and his candle had burnt down, and was flickering unsteadily in the socket, and Mary was alarmed. She did not think of any moral cause for the first moment, but only that something was the matter with him, and went in with a sudden maternal panic to see what it was. Will took no immediate notice of her anxious questions, but he condescended to raise his head and prop up his chin with his hands, and stare up into her face.

"Mother," he said, "you always go on as if a fellow was ill. Can't one be thinking a little without anything being the matter? I should have put out my light had I known you were coming up-stairs."

"You know, Will, that I cannot have you sit here and think, as you say. It is not thinking — it is brooding, and does you harm," said Mrs. Ochterlony. "Jump up, and go to bed."

"Presently," said the boy. "Is it true that Hugh will go to Oxford, mamma?"

"Very likely," said Mary, with some pride. "Your uncle will see how he has got on with his studies, and after that I think he will go."

"What for?" said Will. "What is the good? He knows as much as he wants to know, and Mr. Small is quite good enough for him."

"What for?" said Mary, with displeasure. "For his education, like other gentlemen, and that he may take his right position. But you are too young to understand all that. Get up, and go to bed."

"I am not too young to understand," said Wilfrid; "what is the good of throwing money and time away?

You may tell my uncle, Hugh will never do any good at Oxford; and I don't see, for my part, why he should be the one to go."

"He is the eldest son, and he is your uncle's heir," said Mary, with a conscious swelling of her motherly heart.

"I don't see what difference being the eldest makes," said Will, embracing his knees. "I have been thinking over it this long time. Why should he be sent to Oxford, and the rest of us stay at home? What does it matter about the eldest? A fellow is not any better than me because he was born before me. You might as well send Peggy to Oxford," said Will, with vehemence, "as send Hugh."

Mrs. Ochterlony, whose mind just then was specially occupied by Hugh, was naturally disturbed by this speech. She put out the flickering candle, and set down her own light, and closed the door. "I cannot let you speak so about your brother, Will," she said. "He may not be so quick as you are for your age, but I wish you were as modest and as kind as Hugh is. Why should you grudge his advancement? I used to think you would get the better of this feeling when you ceased to be a child."

"Of what feeling?" cried Will, lifting his pale face from his knees.

"My dear boy, you ought to know," said Mary; "this grudge that any one should have a pleasure or an advantage which you have not. A child may be excused, but no man who thinks so continually of himself —"

"I was not thinking of myself," said Will, springing up from the floor with a flush on his face. "You

will always make a moral affair of it, mother. As if one could not discuss a thing. But I know that Hugh is not clever, though he is the eldest. Let him have Earlston if he likes, but why should he have Oxford? And why should it always be supposed that he is better, and a different kind of clay?"

"I wonder where you learned all that, Will," said Mary, with a smile. "One would think you had picked up some Radical or other. I might be vexed to see Lady Balderston walk out of the room before me, if it was because she pretended to be a better woman; but when it is only because she is Lady Balderston, what does it matter? Hugh can't help being the eldest; if you had been the eldest —"

"Ah!" said Will, with a long breath; "if I had been the eldest —" And then he stopped short.

"What would you have done?" said Mrs. Ochterlony, smiling still.

"I would have done what Hugh will never do," cried the boy. "I would have taken care of everybody. I would have found out what they were fit for, and put them in the right way. The one that had brains should have been cultivated, and the one who had no brains should have — done something else. There should have been no such mistake as — But that is always how it is in the world — everybody says so," said Wilfrid; "stupid people who know nothing about it are set at the head, and those who could manage —"

"Will," said his mother, "do you know you are very presumptuous, and think a great deal too well of yourself? If you were not such a child, I should be angry. It is very well to be clever at your lessons,

but that is no proof that you are able to manage, as you say. Let Hugh and his prospects alone for to-night, and go to bed."

"Yes, I can let him alone," said Will. "I suppose it is not worth one's while to mind — he will do no good at Oxford, you know, that is one thing; — whereas other people — "

"Always yourself, Will," said Mary, with a sigh.

"Myself — or even Islay," said the boy, in the most composed way; "though Islay is very technical. Still, he could do some good. But Hugh is an out-of-door sort of fellow. He would do for a farmer or gamekeeper, or to go to Australia, as he says. A man should always follow his natural bent. If, instead of going by eldest sons and that sort of rubbish, they were to try for the right man in the right place. And then you might be sure to be done the best for, mother, and that he would take care of *you*."

"Will, you are very conceited and very unjust," said Mary; but she was his mother, and she relented as she looked into his weary young face: "but I hope you have your heart in the right place, for all your talk," she said, kissing him before she went away. She went back to her room disturbed, as she had often been before, but still smiling at Will's "way." It was all boyish folly and talk, and he did not mean it; and as he grew older he would learn better. Mary did not care to speculate upon the volcanic elements which, for anything she could tell, might be lying under her very hand. She could not think of different developments of character, and hostile individualities, as people might to whom the three boys were but boys in the abstract, and not Hugh, Islay, and Will — the one as near and

dear to her as the other. Mrs. Ochterlony was not philosophical, neither could she follow out to their natural results the tendencies which she could not but see. She preferred to think of it, as Will himself said, as a moral affair — a fault which would mend; and so laid her head on her pillow with a heart uneasy — but no more uneasy than was consistent with the full awakening of anxious yet hopeful life.

As for Will, he was asleep ten minutes after, and had forgotten all about it. His heart *was* in its right place, though he was plagued with a very arrogant, troublesome, restless little head, and a greater amount of "notions" than are good for his age. He wanted to be at the helm of affairs, to direct everything — a task for which he felt himself singularly competent; but, after all, it was for the benefit of other people that he wanted to rule. It seemed to him that he could arrange for everybody so much better than they could for themselves; and he would have been liberal to Hugh, though he had a certain contempt for his abilities. He would have given him occupation suited to him, and all the indulgences which he was most fitted to appreciate: and he would have made a kind of beneficent empress of his mother, and put her at the head of all manner of benevolences, as other wise despots have been known to do. But Will was the youngest, and nobody so much as asked his advice, or took him into consideration; and the poor boy was thus thrown back upon his own superiority, and got to brood upon it, and scorn the weaker expedients with which other people sought to fill up the place which he alone was truly qualified to fill. Fortunately, however, he forgot all this as soon as he had fallen asleep.

Hugh had no such legislative views for his part. He was not given to speculation. He meant to do his duty, and be a credit to everybody belonging to him; but he was a great deal "younger" than his boy-brother, and it did not occur to him to separate himself in idea — even to do them good — from his own people. The future danced and glimmered before him, but it was a brightness without any theory in it — a thing full of spontaneous good-fortune and well-doing, with which his own cleverness had nothing to do. Islay, for his part, thought very little about it. He was pleased for Hugh's sake, but as he had always looked upon Hugh's good fortune as a certainty, the fact did not excite him, and he was more interested about a tough problem he was working at, and which his uncle's visit had interrupted. It was a more agitated household than it had been a few months before — ere the doors of the future had opened suddenly upon the lads; but there was still no agitation under the Cottage roof which was inconsistent with sweet rest and quiet sleep.

It made a dreadful difference in the house, as everybody said, when the two boys went away — Islay to Mr. Cramer's, the "coach" who was to prepare him for his examination, and Hugh to Earlston. The Cottage had always been quiet, its inhabitants thought, but now it fell into a dead calm, which was stifling and unearthly. Will, the only representative of youth left among them, was graver than Aunt Agatha, and made no gay din, but only noises of an irritating kind. He kicked his legs and feet about, and the legs of all the chairs, and let his books fall, and knocked over the flower-stands — which were all exasperating sounds;

but he did not fill the house with snatches of song, with laughter, and the pleasant evidence that a light heart was there. He used to "read" in his own room, with a diligence which was much stimulated by the conviction that Mr. Small was very little ahead of him, and, to keep up his position of instructor, must work hard, too; and, when this was over, he planted himself in a corner of the drawing-room, in the great Indian chair, with a book, beguiling the two ladies into unconsciousness of his presence, and then interposing in their conversation in the most inconvenient way. This was Will's way of showing his appreciation of his mother's society. He was not her right hand, like Hugh, nor did he watch over her comfort in Islay's steady, noiseless way. But he liked to be in the same room with her, to haunt the places where she was, to interfere in what she was doing, and seize the most unfit moments for the expression of his sentiments. With Aunt Agatha he was abrupt and indifferent, being insensible to all conventional delicacies; and he took pleasure, or seemed to take pleasure, in contradicting Mrs. Ochterlony, and going against all her conclusions and arguments; but he paid her the practical compliment of preferring her society, and keeping by her side.

It was while thus left alone, and with the excitement of this first change fresh upon her, that Mrs. Ochterlony heard another piece of news which moved her greatly. It was that the regiment at Carlisle was about to leave, and that it was *Our* regiment which was to take its place. She thought she was sorry for the first moment. It was upon one of those quiet afternoons, just after the boys had left the Cottage, when

the two ladies were sitting in the silence, not talking much, thinking how long it was to post-time, and how strange it was that the welcome steps and voices which used to invade the quiet so abruptly and so sweetly, were now beyond hoping for. And the afternoon seemed to have grown so much longer, now that there was no Hugh to burst in with news from the outer world, no Islay to emerge from his problem. Will sat, as usual, in the great chair, but he was reading, and did not contribute to the cheerfulness of the party. And it was just then that Sir Edward came in, doubly welcome, to talk of the absent lads, and ask for the last intelligence of them, and bring this startling piece of news. Mrs. Ochterlony was aware that the regiment had finished its service in India long ago, and there was, of course, no reason why it should not come to Carlisle, but it was not an idea which had ever occurred to her. She thought she was sorry for the first moment, and the news gave her an unquestionable shock; but, after all, it was not a shock of pain; her heart gave a leap, and kept on beating faster, as with a new stimulus. She could think of nothing else all the evening. Even when the post came, and the letters, and all the wonderful first impressions of the two new beginners in the world, this other thought returned as soon as it was possible for any thought to regain a footing. She began to feel as if the very sight of the uniform would be worth a pilgrimage; and then there would be so many questions to ask, so many curiosities and yearnings to satisfy. She could not keep her mind from going out into endless speculations — how many would remain of her old friends? — how many might have dropped out of the ranks, or exchanged, or re-

tired, or been promoted? — how many new marriages there had been, and how many children? — little Emma Askell, for instance, how many babies she might have now? Mary had kept up a desultory correspondence with some of the ladies for a year or two, and even had continued for a long time to get serious letters from Mrs. Kirkman; but these correspondences had dropped off gradually, as is their nature, and the colonel's wife was not a woman to enlarge on Emma Askell's babies, having matters much more important on hand.

This new opening of interest moved Mrs. Ochterlony in spite of herself. She forgot all the painful associations, and looked forward to the arrival of the regiment as an old sailor might look for the arrival of a squadron on active service. Did the winds blow and the waves rise as they used to do on those high seas from which they came? Though Mary had been so long becalmed, she remembered all about the conflicts and storms of that existence more vividly than she remembered what had passed yesterday, and she had a strange longing to know whether all that had departed from her own life existed still for her old friends. Between the breaks of the tranquil conversation she felt herself continually relapse into the regimental roll, always beginning again and always losing the thread; recalling the names of the men and of their wives whom she had been kind to once, and feeling as if they belonged to her, and as if something must be brought back to her by their return.

There was, however, little said about it all that evening, much as it was in Mrs. Ochterlony's mind. When the letters had been discussed, the conversation

languished. Summer had begun to wane, and the roses were over, and it began to be impracticable to keep the windows open all the long evening. There was even a fire for the sake of cheerfulness — a little fire which blazed and crackled and made twice as much display as if it had been a serious winter fire and essential to existence — and all the curtains were drawn except over the one window from which Sir Edward's light was visible. Aunt Agatha had grown more fanciful than ever about that window since Winnie's marriage. Even in winter the shutters were never closed there until Miss Seton herself went upstairs, and all the long night the friendly star of Sir Edward's lamp shone faint but steady in the distance. In this way the hall and the cottage kept each other kindly company, and the thought pleased the old people, who had been friends all their lives. Aunt Agatha sat by her favourite table, with her own lamp burning softly and responding to Sir Edward's far-off light, and she never raised her head without seeing it and thinking thoughts in which Sir Edward had but a small share. It was darker than usual on this special night, and there were neither moon nor stars to diminish the importance of the domestic Pharos. Miss Seton looked up, and her eyes lingered upon the blackness of the window and the distant point of illumination, and she sighed as she often did. It was a long time ago, and the boys had grown up in the meantime, and intruded much upon Aunt Agatha's affections; but still these interlopers had not made her forget the especial child of her love.

"My poor dear Winnie!" said the old lady. "I sometimes almost fancy I can see her coming in by

that window. She was fond of seeing Sir Edward's light. Now that the dear boys are gone, and it is so quiet again, does it not make you think sometimes of your darling sister, Mary? If we could only hear as often from her as we hear from Islay and Hugh —"

"But it is not long since you had a letter," said Mary, who, to tell the truth, had not been thinking much of her darling sister, and felt guilty when this appeal was made to her.

"Yes," said Aunt Agatha, with a sigh, "and they are always such nice letters; but I am afraid I am very discontented, my dear love. I always want to have something more. I was thinking some of your friends in the regiment could tell you, perhaps, about Edward. I never would say it to you, for I knew that you had things of your own to think about; but for a long time I have been very uneasy in my mind."

"But Winnie has not complained," said Mary, looking up unconsciously at Sir Edward's window, and feeling as if it shone with a certain weird and conscious light, like a living creature aware of all that was being said.

"She is not a girl ever to complain," said Aunt Agatha, proudly. "She is more like what I would have been myself, Mary, if I had ever been — in the circumstances, you know. She would break her heart before she would complain. I think there is a good deal of difference, my dear, between your nature and ours; and that was, perhaps, why you never quite understood my sweet Winnie. I am sure you are more reasonable; but you are not — not to call passionate, you know. It is a great deal better, a very great deal

better," cried Aunt Agatha, anxiously. "You must not think I do not see that; but Winnie and I are a couple of fools that would do anything for love; and, rather than complain, I am sure she would die."

Mary did not say that Winnie had done what was a great deal more than complaining, and had set her husband before them in a very uncomfortable light — and she took the verdict upon herself quietly, as a matter of course. "Mr. Askell used to know him very well," she said; "perhaps he knows something. But Edward Percival never was very popular, and you must not quarrel with me if I bring you back a disagreeable report. I think I will go into Carlisle as soon as they arrive — I should like to see them all again."

"I should like to hear the truth whatever it is," said Aunt Agatha, "but my dear love, seeing them all will be a great trial for you."

Mary was silent, for she was thinking of other things: not merely of her happy days, and the difference which would make such a meeting "a great trial;" but of the one great vexation and mortification of her life, of which the regiment was aware — and whether the painful memory of it would ever return again to vex her. It had faded out of her recollection in the long peacefulness and quiet of her life. Could it ever return again to shame and wound, as it had once done? From where she was sitting with her work, between the cheerful lamp and the bright little blazing fire, Mary went away in an instant to the scene so distant and different, and was kneeling again by her husband's side, a woman humbled, yet never before so indignantly, resentfully proud, in the little chapel of the station. Would it ever come back again, that one

blot on her life, with all its false, injurious suggestions? She said to herself "No." No doubt it had died out of other people's minds as out of her own, and on Kirtell-side nobody would have dared to doubt on such a subject; and now that the family affairs were settled, and Hugh was established at Earlston, his uncle's acknowledged heir, this cloud, at least, could never rise on her again to take the comfort out of her life. She dismissed the very thought of it from her mind, and her heart warmed to the recollection of the old faces and the old ways. She had a kind of a longing to see them, as if her life would be completer after. It was not as "a great trial" that Mary thought of it. She was too eager and curious to know how they had all fared; and if, to some of them at least, the old existence, so long broken up for herself, continued and flourished as of old.

CHAPTER XXV.

It was accordingly with a little excitement that when the regiment had actually arrived Mrs. Ochterlony set out for the neighbouring town to renew her acquaintance with her old friends. It was winter by that time, and winter is seldom very gentle in Cumberland; but she was too much interested to be detained by the weather. She had said nothing to Wilfrid on the subject, and it startled her a little to find him standing at the door waiting for her, carefully dressed, which was not usually a faculty of his, and evidently prepared to accompany her. When she opened the Cottage door to

go out, and saw him, an unaccountable panic seized her. There he stood in the sunshine, — not gay and thoughtless like his brother Hugh, nor preoccupied like Islay, — with his keen eyes and sharp ears, and mind that seemed always to lie in wait for something. The recollection of the one thing which she did not want to be known had come strongly to her mind once more at that particular moment; a little tremor had run through her frame — a sense of half-painful, half-pleasant excitement. When her eye fell on Wilfrid, she went back a step unconsciously, and her heart for the moment seemed to stop beating. She wanted to bring her friends to Kirtell, to show them her boys and make them acquainted with all her life; and probably, had it been Hugh, he would have accompanied her as a matter of course. But somehow Wilfrid was different. Without knowing what her reason was, she felt reluctant to undergo the first questionings and reminiscences with this keen spectator standing by to hear and see all, and to demand explanation of matters which it might be difficult to explain.

"Did you mean to go with me, Will?" she said. "But you know we cannot leave Aunt Agatha all by herself. I wanted to see you to ask you to be as agreeable as possible while I am gone."

"I am never agreeable to Aunt Agatha," said Will; "she always liked the others best; and besides, she does not want me, and I am going to take care of you."

"Thank you," said Mary, with a smile; "but I don't want you either for to-day. We shall have so many things to talk about — old affairs that you would not understand."

"I like that sort of thing," said Will; "I like listening to women's talk — especially when it is about things I don't understand. It is always something new."

Mary smiled, but there was something in his persistence that frightened her. "My dear Will, I don't want you to-day," she said with a slight shiver, in spite of herself.

"Why, mamma?" said Will, with open eyes.

He was not so well brought up as he ought to have been, as everybody will perceive. He did not accept his mother's decision, and put away his Sunday hat, and say no more about it. On the contrary, he looked with suspicion (as she thought) at her, and kept his position — surprised and remonstrative, and not disposed to give in.

"Will," said Mrs. Ochterlony, "I will not have you with me, and that must be enough. These are all people whom I have not seen since you were a baby. It may be a trial for us all to meet, for I don't know what may have happened to them. I can speak of my affairs before you, for you — know them all," Mary went on with a momentary faltering; "but it is not to be supposed that they could speak of theirs in the presence of a boy they do not know. Go now and amuse yourself, and don't do anything to frighten Aunt Agatha; and you can come and meet me by the evening train."

But she could not get rid of a sense of fear as she left him. He was not like other boys, from whose mind a little contradiction passes away almost as soon as it is spoken. He had that strange faculty of connecting one thing with another, which is sometimes so valuable,

and sometimes leads a lively intellect so much astray; and if ever he should come to know that there was anything in his mother's history which she wished to keep concealed from him——. It was a foolish thought, but it was not the less painful on that account. Mary had come to the end of her little journey before she got free from its influence. The united household at the cottage was not rich enough to possess anything in the shape of a carriage, but they were near the railway, which served almost the same purpose. It seemed to Mrs. Ochterlony as if the twelve intervening years were but a dream when she found herself in a drawing-room which had already taken Mrs. Kirkman's imprint, and breathed of her in every corner. It was not such a room, it is true, as the hot Indian chamber in which Mary had last seen the colonel's wife. It was one of the most respectable and sombre, as well as one of the best of the houses which let themselves furnished, with an eye to the officers. It had red curtains and red carpets, and blinds drawn more than half way down; and there were two or three boxes, with a significant slit in the lid, distributed about the different tables. In the centre of the round table before the fire there was a little trophy built up of small Indian gods, which were no doubt English manufacture, but which had been for a long time Mrs. Kirkman's text, and quite invaluable to her as a proof of the heathen darkness, which was her favourite subject; and at the foot of this ugly pyramid lay a little heap of pamphlets, reports of all the societies under heaven. Mary recognised, too, as she sat and waited, the large brown-paper cover, in which she knew by experience Mrs. Kirkman's favourite tracts were enclosed; and the little basket which con-

tained a smaller roll, and which had room besides occasionally for a little tea and sugar, when circumstances made them necessary; and the book with limp boards, in which the Colonel's wife kept her list of names, with little biographical comments opposite, which had once amused the subalterns so much when it fell into their hands. She had her sealed book besides, with a Bramah lock, which was far too sacred to be revealed to profane eyes; but yet, perhaps, she liked to tantalize profane eyes with the sight of its undiscoverable riches, for it lay on the table like the rest. This was how Mary saw at a glance that, whatever might have happened to the others, Mrs. Kirkman at least was quite unchanged.

She came gliding into the room a minute after, so like herself that Mrs. Ochterlony felt once more that time was not, and that her life had been a dream. She folded her visitor in a silent embrace, and kissed her with inexpressible meaning, and fanned her cheeks with those two long locks hanging out of curl, which had been her characteristic embellishments since ever any one remembered. The light hair was now a little grey, but that made no difference to speak of either in colour or general aspect; and, so far as any other change went, those intervening years might never have been.

"My dear Mary!" she said at last. "My dear friend! Oh, what a thought that little as we deserve it, we should have been *both* spared to meet again!"

There was an emphasis on the *both* which it was very touching to hear; and Mary naturally could not but feel that the wonder and the thankfulness were chiefly on her own account.

"I am very glad to see you again," she said, feeling her heart yearn to her old friend — "and so entirely unchanged."

"Oh, I hope not," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I hope we have *both* profited by our opportunities, and made some return for so many mercies. One great thing I have looked forward to ever since I knew we were coming here, was the thought of seeing you again. You know I always considered you one of my own little flock, dear Mary! one of those who would be my crown of rejoicing. It is such a pleasure to have you again."

And Mrs. Kirkman gave Mrs. Ochterlony another kiss, and thought of the woman that was a sinner with a gush of sweet feeling in her heart.

As for Mary, she took it very quietly, having no inclination to be affronted or offended — but, on the contrary, a kind of satisfaction in finding all as it used to be; the same thoughts and the same kind of talk, and everything unchanged, while all with herself had changed so much. "Thank you," she said; "and now tell me about yourself and about them all; the Hesketh and the Churchills, and all our old friends. I am thirsting to hear about them, and what changes there may have been, and how many are here."

"Ah, my dear Mary, there have been many changes," said Mrs. Kirkman. "Mrs. Churchill died years ago — did you not hear? — and in a very much more prepared state of mind, I trust and hope; and he has a curacy somewhere, and is bringing up the poor children — in his own pernicious views, I sadly fear."

"Has he pernicious views?" said Mary. "Poor

Mrs. Churchill — and yet one could not have looked for anything else."

"Don't say poor," said Mrs. Kirkman. "It is good for her to have been taken away from the evil to come. He is very lax, and always was very lax. You know how little he was to be depended upon at the station, and how much was thrown upon me, unworthy as I am, to do; and it is sad to think of those poor dear children brought up in such opinions. They are very poor, but that is nothing in comparison. Captain Hesketh retired when we came back to England. They went to their own place in the country, and they are very comfortable, I believe — too comfortable, Mary. It makes them forget things that are so much more precious. And I doubt if there is anybody to say a faithful word —"

"She was very kind," said Mary, "and good to everybody. I am very sorry they are gone."

"Yes, she was kind," said Mrs. Kirkman, "that kind of natural amiability which is such a delusion. And everything goes well with them," she added, with a sigh: "there is nothing to rouse them up. Oh, Mary, you remember what I said when your pride was brought low — anything is better than being let alone."

Mrs. Ochterlony began to feel her old opposition stirring in her mind, but she refrained heroically, and went on with her interrogatory. "And the doctor," she said, "and the Askells? — they are still in the regiment. I want you to tell me where I can find Emma, and how things have gone with her — poor child! but she ought not to be such a baby now."

Mrs. Kirkman sighed. "No, she ought not to be a baby," she said. "I never like to judge any one,

and I would like you to form your own opinion, Mary. She too has little immortal souls committed to her; and oh! it is sad to see how little people think of such a trust — whereas others who would have given their whole souls to it — But no doubt it is all for the best. I have not asked you yet how are your dear boys? I hope you are endeavouring to make them grow in grace. Oh, Mary, I hope you have thought well over your responsibility. A mother has so much in her hands."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ochterlony, quickly; "but they are very good boys, and I have every reason to be content with them. Hugh is at Earlston, just now, with his uncle. He is to succeed him, you know; and he is going to Oxford directly, I believe. And Islay is going to Woolwich if he can pass his examination. He is just the same long-headed boy he used to be. And Will — my baby; perhaps you remember what a little thing he was? — I think he is going to be the genius of the family." Mary went on with a simple effusiveness unusual to her, betrayed by the delight of talking about her boys to some one who knew and yet did not know them. Perhaps she forgot that her listener's interest could not possibly be so great as her own.

Mrs. Kirkman sat with her hands clasped on her knee, and she looked in Mary's eyes with a glance which was meant to go to her soul — a mournful inquiring glance which, from under the dropped eyelids, seemed to fall as from an altitude of scarcely human compassion and solicitude. "Oh, call them not good," she said. "Tell me what signs of awakening you have seen in their hearts. Dear Mary, do not neglect the one thing needful for your precious boys. Think of

their immortal souls. That is what interests me much more than their worldly prospects. Do you think their hearts have been truly touched —"

"I think God has been very kind to us all, and that they are good boys," said Mary; "you know we don't think quite alike on some subjects; or, at least, we don't express ourselves alike. I can see you do as much as ever among the men, and among the poor —"

"Yes," said Mrs. Kirkman, with a sigh; "I feel unworthy of it, and the flesh is weak, and I would fain draw back; but it happens strangely that there is always a very lukewarm ministry wherever we are placed, my dear. I would give anything in the world to be but a hearer of the word like others; but yet woe is unto me if I neglect the work. This is some one coming in now to speak with me on spiritual matters. I am at home to them between two and three; but, my dear Mary, it is not necessary that you, who have been in the position of an inquiring soul yourself, should go away."

"I will come back again," said Mary, rising; "and you will come to see me at Kirtell, will not you? It makes one forget how many years have passed to see you employed exactly as of old."

"Ah, we are all too apt to forget how the years pass," said Mrs. Kirkman. She gave a nod of recognition to some women who came shyly in at the moment, and then she took Mary's hand and drew her a step aside. "And nothing more has happened, Mary?" she said; "nothing has followed? and there is to be no inquiry or anything? I am very thankful, for your sake."

"Inquiry!" said Mary, with momentary amazement. "What kind of inquiry? what could have followed? I do not know what you mean!"

"I mean about — what gave us all so much pain — your marriage, Mary," said Mrs. Kirkman. "I hope there has been nothing about it again?"

This was a very sharp trial for the superstition of old friendship in Mrs. Ochterlony's heart, especially as the inquiring souls who had come to see Mrs. Kirkman were within hearing, and looked with a certain subdued curiosity upon the visitor and the conversation. Mary's face flushed with a sudden burning, and indignation came to her aid; but even at that moment her strongest feeling was thankfulness that Wilfrid was not there.

"I do not know what could have been about it," she said: "I am among my own people here; my marriage was well known, and everything about it, in my own place."

"You are angry, dear," said Mrs. Kirkman. "Oh, don't encourage angry feelings; you know I never made any difference; I never imagined it was your fault. And I am so glad to hear it has made no unpleasantness with the dear boys."

Perhaps it was not with the same charity as at first that Mrs. Ochterlony felt the long curls again fan her cheek, but still she accepted the farewell kiss. She had expected some ideal difference, some visionary kind of elevation, which would leave the same individual, yet a loftier kind of woman, in the place of her former friend. And what she had found was a person quite unchanged — the same woman, harder in her peculiarities rather than softer, as is unfortunately the most usual case. The Colonel's wife had the best meaning in the

world, and she was a good woman in her way; but not a dozen lives, let alone a dozen years, could have given her the finer sense which must come by nature, nor even that tolerance and sweetness of experience, which is a benefit which only a few people in the world draw from the passage of years. Mary was disappointed, but she acknowledged in her heart — having herself acquired that gentleness of experience — that she had no right to be disappointed; and it was with a kind of smile at her own vain expectations that she went in search of Emma Askell, her little friend of old — the impulsive girl, who had amused her, and loved her, and worried her in former times. Young Askell was Captain now, and better off, it was to be hoped: but yet they were not well enough off to be in a handsome house, or have everything proper about them, like the Colonel's wife. It was in the outskirts of the town that Mary had to seek them, in a house with a little bare garden in front, bare in its winter nakedness, with its little grass-plot trodden down by many feet, and showing all those marks of neglect and indifference which betray the stage at which poverty sinks into a muddle of discouragement and carelessness, and forgets appearances. It was a dirty little maid who opened the door, and the house was another very inferior specimen of the furnished house so well known to all unsettled and wandering people. The chances are, that delicate and orderly as Mrs. Ochterlony was by nature, the sombre shabbiness of the place would not have struck her in her younger days, when she, too, had to take her chance of furnished houses, and do her best, as became a soldier's wife. And then poor little Emma had been married too early, and began her struggling, shifty

life too soon, to know anything about that delicate domestic order, which is half a religion. Poor little Emma! she was as old now as Mary had been when she came back to Kirtell with her boys, and it was difficult to form any imagination of what time might have done for her. Mrs. Ochterlony went up the narrow stairs with a sense of half-amused curiosity, guided not only by the dirty little maid, but by the sound of a little voice crying in a lamentable, endless sort of way. It was a kind of cry which in itself told the story of the family — not violent, as if the result of a sudden injury or fit of passion, which there was somebody by to console or to punish, but the endless, tedious lamentation, which nobody took any particular notice of, or cared about.

And this was the scene that met Mrs. Ochterlony's eyes when she entered the room. She had sent the maid away and opened the door herself, for her heart was full. It was a shabby little room on the first floor, with cold windows opening down to the floor, and letting in the cold Cumberland winds to chill the feet and aggravate the temper of the inhabitants. In the foreground sat a little girl with a baby sleeping on her knee, one little brother in front of her and another behind her chair, and that pretty air of being herself the domestic centre and chief mover of everything, which it is at once sweet and sad to see in a child. This little woman neither saw nor heard the stranger at the door. She had been hushing and rocking her baby, and, now that it had peaceably sunk to sleep, was about to hear her little brother's lesson, as it appeared; while at the same time addressing a word of remonstrance to the author of the cry, another small

creature who sat rubbing her eyes with two fat fists, upon the floor. Of all this group, the only one aware of Mary's appearance was the little fellow behind his sister's chair, who lifted wondering eyes to the door, and stared and said nothing, after the manner of children. The little party was so complete in itself, and seemed to centre so naturally in the elder sister, that the spectator felt no need to seek further. It was all new and unlooked-for, yet it was a kind of scene to go to the heart of a woman who had children of her own; and Mary stood and looked at the little ones, and at the child-mother in the midst of them, without even becoming aware of the presence of the actual mother, who had been lying on a sofa, in a detached and separate way, reading a book, which she now thrust under her pillow, as she raised herself on her cushions and gazed with wide-open eyes at her visitor, who did not see her. It was a woman very little like the pretty Emma of old times, with a hectic colour on her cheeks, her hair hanging loosely and disordered by lying down, and the absorbed, half-awakened look, natural to a mind which has been suddenly roused up out of a novel into an actual emergency. The hushing of the baby to sleep, the hearing of the lessons, the tedious crying of the little girl at her feet, had all gone on without disturbing Mrs. Askell. She had been so entirely absorbed in one of Jane Eyre's successors and imitators (for that was the epoch of Jane Eyre in novels), and Nelly was so completely responsible for all that was going on, that the mother had never even roused up to a sense of what was passing round her, until the door opened and the stranger looked in with a face which was not a stranger's face.

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Askell, springing up. "Oh, my Madonna, can it be you? Are you sure it is you, you dear, you darling! Don't go looking at the children as if they were the principal, but give me a kiss and say it is you, — say you are sure it is you!"

And the rapture of delight and welcome she went into, though it showed how weak-minded and excitable she was, was in its way not disagreeable to Mary, and touched her heart. She gave the kiss she was asked for, and received a flood in return, and such embraces as nearly took her breath away; and then Nelly was summoned to take "the things" off an easy chair, the only one in the room, which stood near her mother's sofa. Mary was still in Mrs. Askell's embrace when this command was given, but she saw the girl gather up the baby in her arms, and moving softly not to disturb the little sleeper, collect the encumbering articles together and draw the chair forward. No one else moved or took any trouble. The bigger boy stood and watched behind his sister's chair, and the younger one turned round to indulge in the same inspection, and little Emma took her fists out of her eyes. But there was nobody but the little woman with the baby who could get for the guest the only comfortable chair.

"Now sit down and be comfortable, and let me look at you; I could be content just to look at you all day," said Emma. "You are just as you always were, and not a bit changed. It is because you have not had all our cares. I look a perfect fright, and as old as my grandmother, and I am no good for anything; but you are just the same as you used to be. Oh, it is just like the old times, seeing you! I have been in

such a state, I did not know what to do with myself since ever I knew we were coming here."

"But I do not think you are looking old, though you look delicate," said Mary. "Let me make acquaintance with the children. Nelly, you used to be in my arms as much as your mamma's when you were a baby. You are just the same age as my Will, and you were the best baby that ever was. Tell me their names and how old they all are. You know they are all strangers to me."

"Yes," said their mother, with a little fretfulness. "It was such a merey Nelly was the eldest. I never could have kept living if she had been a boy. I have been such a suffering creature, and we have been moved about so much, and oh, we have had so much to do! You can't fancy what a life we have had," cried poor Emma; and the mere thought of it brought tears to her eyes.

"Yes, I know it is a troublesome life," said Mary; "but you are young, and you have your husband, and the children are all so well —"

"Yes, the children are all well," said Emma; "but then every new place they come to, they take measles or something, and I am gone to a shadow before they are right again; and then the doctors' bills — I think Charley and Lucy and Emma have had *everything*," said the aggrieved mother; "and they always take them so badly; and then Askell takes it into his head it is damp linen or something, and thinks it is my fault. It is bad enough when a woman is having her children," cried poor Emma, "without all their illnesses, you know, and tempers and bills, and every-

thing besides. Oh, Madonna! you are so well off. You live quiet, and you know nothing about all our cares."

"I think I would not mind the cares," said Mary; "if you were quiet like me, you would not like it. You must come out to Kirtell for a little change."

"Oh, yes, with all my heart," said Emma. "I think sometimes it would do me all the good in the world just to be out of the noise for a little, and where there was nothing to be found fault with. I should feel like a girl again, my Madonna, if I could be with you."

"And Nelly must come too," said Mrs. Ochterlony, looking down upon the little bright, anxious, careful face.

Nelly was thirteen — the same age as Wilfrid; but she was little, and laden with the care of which her mother talked. Her eyes were hazel eyes, such as would have run over with gladness had they been left to nature, and her brown hair curled a little on her neck. She was uncared for, badly dressed, and not old enough yet for the instinct that makes the budding woman mindful of herself. But the care that made Emma's cheek hollow and her life a waste, looked sweet out of Nelly's eyes. The mother thought she bore it all, and cried and complained under it, while the child took it on her shoulders unawares and carried it without any complaint. Her soft little face lighted up for a moment as Mary spoke, and then her look turned on the sleeping baby with that air half infantile, half motherly, which makes a child's face like an angel's.

"I do not think I could go," she said; "for the children are not used to the new nurse; and it would make poor papa so uncomfortable; and then it would

do mamma so much more good to be quiet for a little without the children —"

Mary rose up softly just then, and, to Nelly's great surprise, bent over her and kissed her. Nobody but such another woman could have told what a sense of envy and yearning was in Mary's heart as she did it. How she would have surrounded with tenderness and love that little daughter who was but a domestic slave to Emma Askell! and yet, if she had been Mary's daughter, and surrounded by love and tenderness, she would not have been such a child. The little thing brightened and blushed, and looked up with a gleam of sweet surprise in her eyes. "Oh, thank you, Mrs. Ochterlony," she said, in that sudden flush of pleasure; and the two recognised each other in that moment, and knitted between them, different as their ages were, that bond of everlasting friendship which is made oftener at sight than in any more cautious way.

"Come and sit by me," said Emma, "or I shall be jealous of my own child. She is a dear little thing, and so good with the others. Come and tell me about your boys. And, oh, please, just one word — we have so often spoken about it, and so often wondered. Tell me, dear Mrs. Ochterlony, did it never do any harm?"

"Did what never do any harm?" asked Mary, with once more a sudden pang of thankfulness that Wilfrid was not there.

Mrs. Askell threw her arms round Mary's neck and kissed her and clasped her close. "There never was any one like you," she said; "you never even would complain."

This second assault made Mary falter and recoil, in spite of herself. They had not forgot, though she

might have forgotten. And, what was even worse than words, as Emma spoke, the serious little woman-child, who had won Mrs. Ochterlony's heart, raised her sweet eyes and looked with a mixture of wonder and understanding in Mary's face. The child whom she would have liked to carry away and make her own — did she, too, know and wonder? There was a great deal of conversation after this — a great deal about the Askells themselves, and a great deal about Winnie and her husband, whom Mrs. Askell knew much more about than Mrs. Ochterlony did. But it would be vain to say that anything she heard made as great an impression upon Mary as the personal allusions which sent the blood tingling through her veins. She went home, at last, with that most grateful sense of home which can only be fully realised by those who return from the encounter of an indifferent world, and from friends who, though kind, are naturally disposed to regard everything from their own point of view. It is sweet to have friends, and yet by times it is bitter. Fortunately for Mary, she had the warm circle of her own immediate belongings to return into, and could retire, as it were, into her citadel, and there smile at all the world. Her boys gave her that sweetest youthful adoration which is better than the love of lovers, and no painful ghost lurked in their memory — or so, at least, Mrs. Ochterlony thought.

END OF VOL. I.

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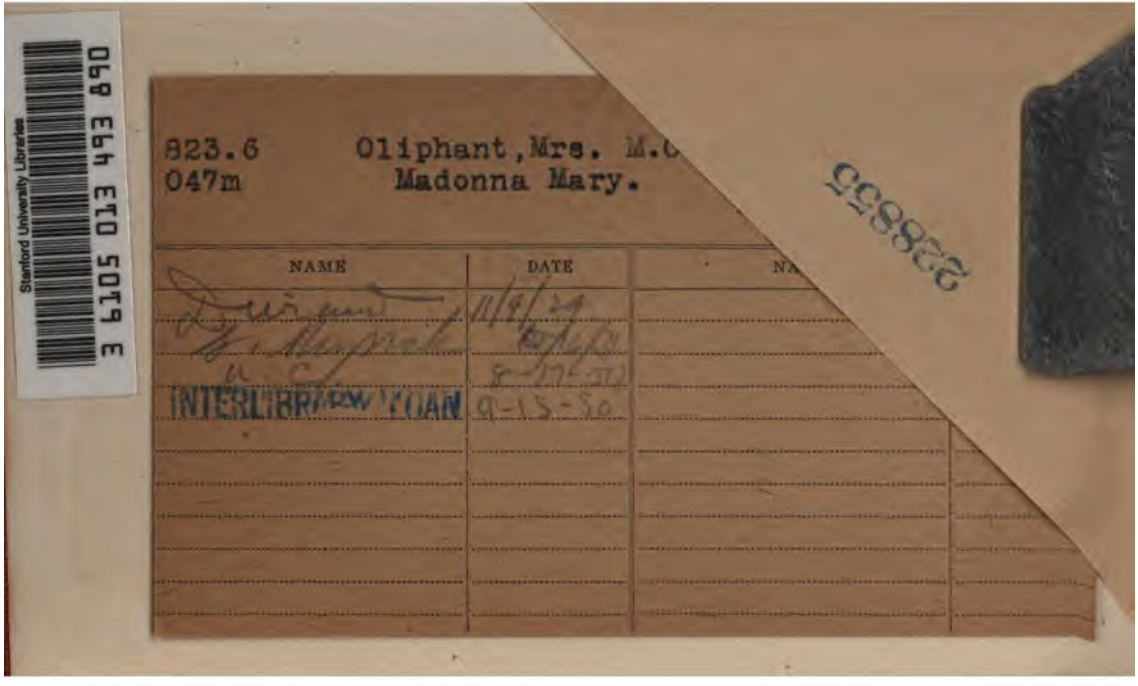
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